

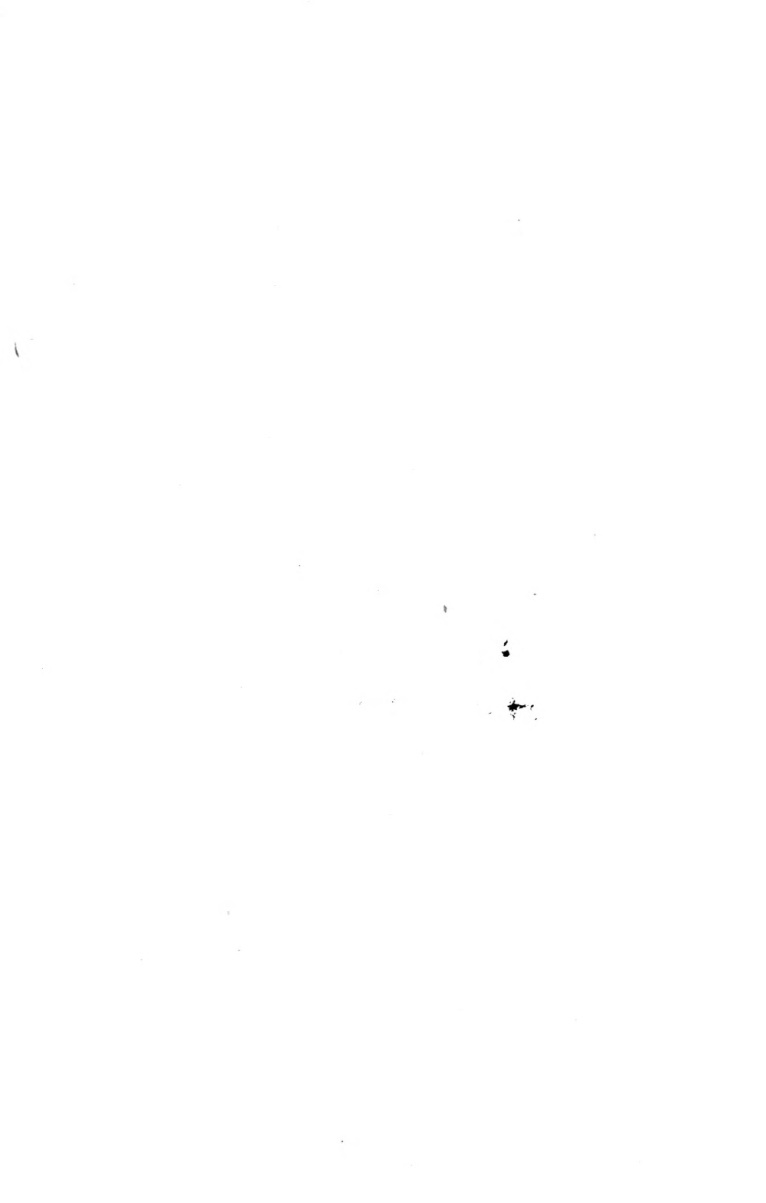
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THIS INDENTURE WITNESSETH.

BY MRS. ALFRED W. HUNT,

AUTHOR OF

“UNDER SEAL OF CONFESSION,” “THORNICROFT’S MODEL,” ETC.

“The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to scourge us.”

KING LEAR.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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III.

TOO LATE.

THIS INDENTURE WITNESSETH.



CHAPTER I.

“ The present moment is our ain,
The neist we never saw.”

BURNS.

“ *Pand.* What have you lost by losing of this day ?

Lew. All days of glory, joy, and happiness.”

KING JOHN.

“ Her eyes looked on me from an emptied heart,
When most my heart was full of her.”

ROSSETTI.

RAVENSKELFE Abbey was a couple of miles from Breamore. It was built down in the very deepest hollow of a valley which lay encircled on all sides but one by a steep, thickly wooded cliff. Here the monks had found a level strip of meadow land just large enough for their

purpose, and here they had built their monastery. A sparkling river tossed and tumbled over its sandstone ledges before it, and beyond that was another steep cliff crowned by another wood. Seen from a little distance, the topmost trees in the woods on each side blended together, and formed one narrow belt of green, varying the bleak moor and pasture land above with the changeful beauties of their colouring ; but a stranger to the country could hardly have divined that a river flowed between them, or that a lovely green valley lay quietly buried below.

Brian rode on thoughtfully till he came to the gate from which the downward sloping valley could first be seen, and where the existence of the abbey was also first revealed. All he could see of it was a grey gateway, and a silvery grey pinnacle beyond. The gateway was still perfect, and seemed to invite all comers to the roofless hospitalities within. He looked down the steep and rugged farm road bordered with gnarled oaks and tangled briars and brambles, and across the pasture to the quiet red-tiled farmhouse which nestled

by the side of the ruin. There was no gay party to be seen, no sign of life but a thin film of smoke from the chimney and a dazzlingly white flock of geese. Halfway down the hill, he found a man in the outlying stable by the roadside, and gave him his horse.

“Any parties here to-day?” asked he, longing to hear confirmation of his own knowledge.

“Oo ay!” said the man, “there’s people: I’ve seen part carriages go by. You should have been here yesterday, though, if you matter being where folks is. T’ trip was here yesterday. T’ Oddfellers cam fra Leeds—hunderds and hunderds and hunderds on ’em; and they danced, and sang, and shouted, until I thought they meant to ding t’ abba down! They likes an outing, does Leeds!”

Inside the gateway were four grey towers embroidered with lichens, marking the point from which the church spire once rose; then wastes of ruined cells, a refectory roofed over by the waving boughs of an ash tree, cloisters traceable only by their foundation walls, a

desolate prior's chamber, a ghostly kitchen, a crypt, and a wishing chair. Each and all of these were disappearing slowly under the quiet hand of time, but so peaceful and beautiful and suggestive was their decay, that the sight brought a certain sense of pleasure with it. Brian began to hear voices, to see figures, but none that he knew or cared for. At last he saw Mrs. Heriot.

“My dear Mr. Templemore! Ah! then your father is better? We have been so anxious, and we feared you were not able to come. I was just saying to that little Miss Wentworth—you know Miss Wentworth, I think—well, I was just saying to her how the illness of one of our friends seemed to take away all pleasure. But he is better?”

Yes, he was better. And where was Miss Wentworth? Brian asked that question, and said that he had not seen her for a long time.

Miss Wentworth was up there in the wishing chair, said Mrs. Heriot, pointing to the narrow stair which led to it. She would be down directly. There were two or three other young ladies on the stairs waiting their

turn to tamper with futurity, and as the way was blocked thus, Brian waited too.

Mrs. Heriot not being a Dorminster lady, and having only just come to Minsteracres from the south, did not know the gossip about Brian and Audrey, but as there were many Dorminster people at the picnic, it was quite certain that she would know it before many minutes were over, now that Brian was there to remind them of it. She had, however, heard something else which had quite reconciled her to the fact that Gus had met Audrey again, and this was that the rich Miss Templemore meant to adopt her. A lady had heard Miss Templemore "use the very words," so if Gus wished to renew his attentions he had nothing to dread from his maternal parent. Mrs. Heriot had indeed received confirmation of this intention from Miss Templemore herself. As an old fellow passenger in the *Dodona*, Mrs. Heriot had thought herself privileged to put some leading questions. Miss Templemore, who had for the moment forgotten the existence of Gus, had answered with her usual directness, so the anxious

mother was thoroughly satisfied that her son was justified in paying Audrey every attention.

Gus himself was, to do him justice, not so mercenary as his mother. He had been delighted to find himself near Audrey, before his mother came with her tale of fortune to cheer him on in his attempt to win her. He had ridden over to Dorminster, to call on her, twice during the ten days he had been at Minsteracres with his uncle, before the rest of the family came northwards, and not finding Audrey at home, had done various lover-like things to prove his constancy. He had sent her a bouquet from the conservatory at Minsteracres. He had sent two poems addressed to her—poems with classical allusions and faultless rhymes, much in the manner of prize poems, but with a somewhat lighter touch. He had despatched these as forerunners of himself, and hoped to stir up slumbering memories of those old days on the sea; and, alas! Audrey thought they were from Brian. She saw the Breamore post-mark. She knew that old Mr. Templemore was ill. She believed what she wished to believe,

and never thought of Gus, but rather thought that even during his illness the squire had been able to tell Brian that he had seen the girl he liked so much, and that he opposed his wishes no longer, and that Brian was too delicate to write of love, or seek his own happiness, while his father was so ill, but had sent these little tokens of his affection, to let her see that his thoughts were even then partly with her, and that when his father was better he would come himself.

So Gus's poems were lying in Audrey's pocket, and had been tightly clasped in her hand all the long drive; and the touch gave her strength, and her heart was light and trustful. She looked very pretty this morning in a tender grey muslin dress, with a pink coral necklace and brooch, and the long drive from Dorminster had seemed very short to her. The gallant Gus had ridden forth to meet her, and a youthful Wiltshire, who sat opposite to Audrey in the carriage, had been too glad to give up his place to him for the sake of exchanging to Mr. Heriot's horse. Mrs. Heriot and that division of the party had met

them at the Abbey Farm, and she had at once begun to treat Audrey like a daughter, as was her custom in days gone by, and had told her how Gus had mentioned her in both the letters which he had written to her from Minsteracres before she came, and how he had said that the park and garden were haunted by memories of the beautiful Miss Wentworth—but did not Audrey think that Gus himself was grown very handsome?

Gus did not leave them long alone, and he stayed by Audrey all the morning. He found her a bright cheery girl, bent on enjoying herself; he changed her into a heavy-hearted woman, resolved for the future to dismiss vain hopes and look truth in the face. It was all Gus who did it. His love-making was of the simplest and most boyish nature, taking shape in such speeches as this—

“Ah, Miss Wentworth! How happy I was when I heard you were coming to-day! There is, I think, nothing so delightful as to be in a really pretty place on a fine day, with any one one likes very much. And for all it is September, mind, this is a very fine day.”

Mrs. Heriot was with them.

“That boy makes a flat kind of lover,” thought she. “I wish he would put a little more life into his way of going on; but she seems to like it.”

Audrey was, however, not thinking of Gus. She was thinking of other scenery and other companions. The garden at Bellosguardo was in her mind’s eye, and she had just touched her dear verse letters.

“This is a very beautiful place,” said she, dashing recklessly into the commonplace, to rescue herself from the reproach of silence; “so peaceful, so quiet, one almost envies those monks who used to live here—one can’t imagine their ever being disturbed by anything.”

“Ah! then you have never read any account of what they said and did when their dishonest neighbours robbed their fish-ponds,” said the bishop. “Of course that did affect their comfort no little; and, my word, but it did stir up their wrath. The language which they use in describing such acts is startling. Those satellites of Satan—those——”

“Bishop, dear,” interrupted Mrs. Heriot, “never mind about their bad words. What do you say to walking to the hermitage? You know the hermitage, my dear Audrey, but Gus does not. It would interest Gus, and I want the bishop to see it. It is only a little way down the river. Do you mind going with us? I should enjoy a quiet talk with you.”

Audrey did not object; she thought she was going to walk with Mrs. Heriot, and liked the idea of a talk with her. But she soon found herself turned over to Gus, and he prattled and “meandered,”—and finally asked her how she liked his verses! And poor Audrey, who had believed those verses to be Brian’s, never having seen his handwriting in her life, was forced to see her golden treasure turn into leaves with an unchanged face. But what a difference this made to her. She had thought them the restrained outpourings of Brian’s love for her, and they were only common verses!

She was vexed that Gus was beginning to be foolish about her again. She must avoid him for the future. She must at once and for ever

dismiss all thought of Brian, and of his wavering and torturing love for her. She would think of him no more.

“Did you send me some flowers too then, Mr. Heriot?” said she in a quiet, firm voice, pausing to obtain complete knowledge before she took this final step—that of uprooting the very thought of Brian.

The suspense of waiting for Gus’s slow coy answer was almost unbearable, and he saw nothing of it, but looked down into her face and thought, “How quiet she has grown! How anxious she looks about it! What a good thing I had the sense to think of sending her those flowers! Women think so much of such small attentions.”

“Yes,” said he; “I thought you would like some flowers from the poor old garden. Yes, I sent them,” he added, seeing a quiver of distress in her face, and wishing that Minster-acres was his, and that he could give it back to her.

“Thank you,” said Audrey gravely. “It was kind of you to think of it.”

But although she made no difficulty about

walking by his side, although she was pleased about the flowers, he did not feel encouraged to press his suit. Some barrier had sprung up between them. She walked by his side ; but she did not seem to see where she was going ; her eyes had lost their brightness—they took in nothing from without, but looked charged with thought and sadness. If he spoke she answered him, if he helped her over difficult places she was thankful, but he and she were as far removed from each other as if they had occupied different worlds. She was trying to cut Brian out of her heart ; the pain of it amounted to that. She had been most selfish and had lived only for him, whilst blind and deaf to the claims of those around her—or at least she falsely accused herself of this. And then they somehow reached the hermitage close by the banks of the river, and saw the remains of two crumbling walls, which it pleased many to think had once formed two sides of the tiny cell where the saint hid himself from view ; but of the true cell all that was left was an irregular ridge in the grass close by, the mere marking of its

foundation. There was, for a moment, something wildly tempting to the poor child who stood looking at these relics, in a life such as his. It would be very good to fly thus from a world which had used you so cruelly—"though," thought she, with a glance aside into the clear waters of the river flowing by, "a deeper peace and a surer rest would be found down there, if only God would forgive one for doing it."

Such thoughts flash through the mind not always by the volition of the thinker, but Audrey's nature was reverent and submissive; she recognized her cross, and did not wish to escape from it in a cowardly manner. Strength would come if she sought it.

"My young friend is pensive," said the bishop, who had for some time been watching her earnest face and motionless attitude, and Audrey could have burst into tears at the incongruity of his words and their inadequacy to represent her thoughts.

"I have a little headache," said she meekly.

"Oh, poor child!" said Mrs. Heriot.

“There, take my smelling-bottle. And, Gus, give Miss Wentworth your arm.”

And this was all the world was prepared to do for her, thought Audrey bitterly; this was all she had to look for in the life before her—Mrs. Heriot’s smelling-bottle and such relief as it and her words could give, and Gus’s arm with all that this offer of it implied; and she with such a heavy pain and deep wound in her heart! She walked on a little way firmly, with lips pressed together to hide all she felt. She had borne up this long time, hoping, only to find herself always hoping in vain, and the thing which made her finally renounce Brian was by no means the worst thing which he had done, but she could believe and trust no more.

Others of the party came fluttering towards them over the closely cropped pasture land; the sound of merry voices came with the river; everybody looked bright and free from thought or care. She roused herself and tried to play a light-hearted part too, but there was a rumour that she had a headache, and Mrs. Heriot hung about her, and Gus walked behind looking disconsolate.

“Oh! you are going back!” cried some of the new-comers to the bishop, “and we hurried here because we wanted you to show us St. Guthlac’s real cell, and to tell us all about him.”

The bishop looked at Audrey. Audrey protested that her headache was nothing. She was quite equal to turning back such a very little way she said; and she wanted to hear about St. Guthlac, too.

It turned out that the bishop would have been much disappointed if this request had not been made, for he had got up his subject, and made some extracts from the saint’s life purposely. It was a touching story. St. Guthlac was originally a poor wandering pedler. Then he had a call to a religious life, and saw bright visions of saints, who bade him leave all and seek to follow in their path. He set out on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, washed his feet in Jordan, and left his shoes on the bank with a vow to go barefoot the rest of his life. He had made his dwelling-place on the spot where they were now standing, and in that very river flowing by he “would stand

up to the neck whole winter nights praying, which so angered the Devill, that one tyme he stole away his clothes that lay on the bank side; but, Guthlac spying him, brought him back with a Pater and an Ave Maria, and forcing the Devill to be just against his will, made him restore them, though his Apparell was soe coarse that the Devill (the Thief) would scarce have worn them; for his Jerkin was of Iron, of which he had worn out three in the tyme of his Hermitage: a strange Coate, whose stuffe had the Ironmonger for the Draper, and a Smith for the Taylour. Neither was his Lodging softer than his Coate, who had a Stone for his Pillow and the ground for his Bed: but his dyet was as coarse as either; for to repent both within and without, as his Shirt was of Sackcloth, soe half the Meal that made him Bread was Ashes."

The bishop read this extract with much feeling. "None of us could do that now, and yet he lived sixty-three years in this way," said he; "and lest his bread should even thus be too palatable, he kept it three months before he touched it: and we grumble at our cooks!"

It was half a shame of Mrs. Heriot to rush in and dispel all these thoughts of penitence and regret by saying, "I am sure, bishop, you never grumble," but she did so; and then, by way of neglecting no lawful opportunity of advancing her son's interests, she added, "And there is Gus—he never grumbles either."

"That is most certainly a fact," said the bishop with a kind glance at his son. "Ah! Miss Wentworth, when I look at Gustavus, and when I think that he might have been one of the reckless, fast young men of the present day, I feel my privilege in having such a boy. Grumble because things were not quite what he liked!—oh no, you won't hear Gustavus doing that. But only the other day, Miss Wentworth, in the coffee-room at York, I came in contact with one of those pampered, ill-conditioned young men who think the world and its creatures exist only to minister to them. I was taking some hurried refreshment. This young man was sitting at a little table near me doing the same, and first he used a wrong expression about the beef, and then about the potatoes;

—he applied the same word to the pickles, and then to the mustard. I was more and more inclined to speak to him, but I thought it wise to contain myself, and did so. It was the same thing when they brought him the bread; and when the waiter looked hurt, the same wicked word was used to him. On that I could hold my peace no longer, but said, ‘Young man, bethink yourself of the sin you are committing, of the holy commandment you are breaking, simply because those humble creatures which feed your sinful body are not as you wish;’ and then, Miss Wentworth,—the same wicked word—was used to me!”

Due sympathy was expressed. And then some one began to dwell on the beauty of the “autumnal tints,” and Audrey looked drearily around to see them, longing above everything to get away home and be quiet. And all this time Brian was seeking her in every part of the ruins, lured here or there by the sound of a voice, or the sight of a dress, which looked in the distance as if it might have been one chosen by her.

Slowly they made their way by the river

side back to the abbey, and before long they came to the wishing chair. You climbed up a half-ruined stair, crept along by the side of a chamber of which the principal part of the floor had fallen in, and in a ruined but beautiful window, looking over wood and river, was the seat which ensured you the fulfilment of any wish you made in it. A gay party was there. White dresses fluttered in and out among the glistening ivy which overhung the stairs; young gentlemen helped the pilgrims of fortune to mount and descend; merry voices, eager exclamations, all sounded inviting, and one after another in turn pressed forward.

“Now, Audrey!” said Mrs. Wiltshire. “Go, my child. They have all wished their wishes but you. Go. I will wait for you here. My fortune has told itself long ago; and, besides, I dare not climb up there.”

“I don’t want to go,” said Audrey; “I have no wish to make.”

“Oh, nonsense! Wish anything; but you may as well wish for something good, for you are sure to get it.”

“I would rather not,” she said again, but, lest they should think her singular, she went. Gus and some young ladies and others went with her, but only one person at a time could go along the narrow path to the wishing chair. In all her trouble, she could not help seeing how beautiful the scene which lay before her was, and how entirely peaceful and soothing. There was a feeling that the whole air was steeped in the prayers which had for so many centuries gone up from the church below. Her friends had told her to ask for what she most desired, and the thing which she now desired was not even to have Brian’s love restored to her, but strength to bear to live without it. For it had come to that: she had no faith in him. And that was her wish; and when she had mentally uttered it, she sat still for a minute or two, feeling the rest and comfort of being alone, and longing for them all to go and leave her. One of the party was called away, and those who were waiting to succeed Audrey did go for a moment or so. Then she looked down below and saw Brian Templemore standing speaking

to Mrs. Wiltshire, who was waiting for her, and he looked as if he were going to wait too.

She longed to escape the meeting ; it was cruel that the trial of her new resolution should come so soon. She dreaded the day-long companionship of Gus and the other Heriots. She was alone now—even Gus had had to go down to let some young ladies pass him ; and seeing that, she glided from the wishing chair and along the narrow track, holding by the wall. Finally, she made her way through a dilapidated window into another part of the ruins, and away farther and farther, hiding as she went, till she came to the ancient kitchen. She found a way of clambering up on to its roof, a vaulted one, of which the ribs remained, all grass-grown and covered with offspring of wind-blown seeds. This roof was hemmed in on the abbey side by the broken ivy-covered walls of a ruined upper chamber ; and here in a corner she hid herself away, sheltered from the sight of every one. Then she took out young Heriot's poems, tore them into tiny pieces, and buried them with a dead rose from his bouquet

under a stone. "If only one could destroy all thought in the same way!" said she. She heard parties strolling about, she could even see them through a tiny loophole of a window; but the kitchen was close by the gateway, and no one's curiosity seemed to lead him in that direction. She waited an hour or more, and then, seeing Mrs. Wiltshire and Mrs. Heriot at some distance superintending the servants as they spread the dinner, she went to help.

"Where have you been, darling? I lost you and was anxious," inquired Mrs. Wiltshire.

"My head ached, so I sat down quietly in a corner, and now it is better."

"Oh, how happy Gus will be to hear that!" said Mrs. Heriot.

"Let me sit near you at dinner, please," whispered Audrey to Mrs. Wiltshire.

After all, she was the best friend she had there. And Audrey did sit by her, and Mrs. Wiltshire made her drink a glass of the champagne which had purchased her that day of pleasure; and Brian tried to get near her, but for some time she was so placed that he could not, nor could he meet her eyes,

for she never raised them. She talked with her neighbours a little, but in a very subdued manner only; that sheltering *ægis* of womanhood—headache—had her in its protection, and her condition excited little remark. Few were personally acquainted with Miss Audrey Wentworth. Her romantic story was whispered to those who might not have heard it. But it was not thought right by many to be too cordial to her; it was unfitting her for the sphere in which her duties lay—disturbing her in the acquisition of content. Only if Miss Templemore were really going to leave her a large fortune, they might have to revise their judgment hereafter;—that was possible, but it would be well to wait until she got it. After dinner, Audrey was in a kind of dream, in which golden-green woods and the noisy flow of water made a background to the sorrows of somebody, probably her own, or why was her heart so sore? Gus and Mrs. Heriot were near her now, and not far away she heard the sonorous boom of the bishop's voice among the rippling laughter and mirth of some of the younger members of the party. He must

have got hopelessly into the habit of dwelling on his son's bright fortunes, for he was actually doing it to other people, and "peaceful parsonage," "charming neighbourhood," even "wonderfully productive garden," were amongst the epithets which she heard. Then there was a little flutter of movement, and she found that Brian was by her side. She was sitting on a forlorn-looking fragment of a capital half imbedded in the ground. He had to stoop very low to shake hands with her, and then he stood in an embarrassed silence, for there were so many bystanders, and it did not seem possible to speak in common words to her.

"I hope, Mr. Templemore," said she, "that your father is much better."

"Yes, he is much better, thank you, but we have been very anxious about him."

"I am afraid so, and yet he seemed so well when I had the pleasure of seeing him three weeks ago. Was his illness caused by a sudden shock?"

"I am afraid so," replied Brian sadly, for 'the undying worm' stung him deeply as he spoke.

“But he is well now, I hope?” said Audrey, pitying his evident distress. “Remember me kindly to him, please.”

“He has your *Disa* in his room.”

“But it is no longer in flower, I am afraid.”

“Yes, there are two new flowers. He means to do his very best to keep it alive.”

“Ah! but I am afraid it won’t flower again—things which were born in another climate don’t flourish well here.”

Before the words were said, she bethought herself of another reading which they were capable of bearing; she had not intended it, and was very sorry she had used them. She heard him sigh.

“I have been quite unable to leave my father lately,” said he, “even for an hour.”

Then he had observed this second meaning? Audrey was silent. He need not apologize to her, she was making no complaint.

“Now that he is rather better, I am going to ride over to Dorminster. I mean to go to-morrow. May I call to see you?”

“We shall be very happy to see you if you find you have time to come,” was her answer;

but there was no spark of pleasure in her manner, no feeling of elation in her heart. He had promised to come so often; words, looks, sighs, promises, meant nothing with him—she was weary of them.

He noticed her listless complaisance, her coldness and want of interest. They piqued his love the more, and he longed to explain himself to her fully. “I expect to be in Dorchester to-morrow. I fully intend it; but if anything unforeseen should occur to prevent me, I am certain to come the day after.”

She only bowed.

It was uncomfortable to have to stand talking at such a height above her, and he longed to sit down on the grass at her feet, but she gave him little or no encouragement to think that she wished him to stay by her, and all those Heriots were there! Was he going to lose her, and in that way, just when he was beginning to feel that she might be his own? Mrs. Heriot looked as if he were an unwelcome addition to their friendly little group; Mrs. Wiltshire's eyes were dancing with curiosity and much appearance of secret informa-

tion with regard to him. He was deeply conscious of the expression in both these ladies' faces, and pined to get Audrey away from them.

"Have you seen the hermitage, Miss Wentworth?" said he. "It is a very pretty walk,—we might make up a small party to go there."

"Miss Wentworth went this morning. She and my son, and I and the bishop, all walked there together," said Mrs. Heriot officiously.

"And you have been to the wishing chair, I know," said he, "for you were there when I came. Do you know that the wishes you make when there come true?"

"Have you been there yourself, Mr. Templemore?" inquired Mrs. Heriot, who seemed determined to be Audrey's spokeswoman.

"No," replied he, "but I am going."

By this time he was half kneeling on the ground near them.

"It is all very well to go to the wishing chair," said Mrs. Heriot, "but very hard to know what one wants the most, for when it comes to the point so many objects of desire press forward."

“Not hard at all,” said he. “I know perfectly well what I wish for the most, and have wished for since last February twelve months.”

That was the very time when he had first met Audrey, and there was a dangerous intonation in his voice which, even by itself, was already beginning to stir a tumult in her heart. And yet, she thought, how wrong and foolish it was to let it be so, for all his words would be forgotten by him an hour after they were spoken.

“You wish your father in his usual health again, I dare say,” observed Mrs. Heriot guardedly.

“That for one thing most undoubtedly, but he is better.”

“Audrey, my dear child,” said she, “it is perhaps hardly prudent to remain sitting so long. Recollect, though it is so fine, it is September. I think I shall go now to the farmhouse, to arrange about the tea; won’t you go with me? You see my brother-in-law, Mr. Heriot—it is his picnic, but he leaves all to me; so come with me, like a dear, and help me a little. I am afraid of forgetting something.”

Audrey rose mechanically. Her reason for making no difficulty about going was this: Brian, if he meant what he said, was perfectly able to come to see her, or to write to her, and had no need to depend on stray speeches or chance meetings for explanation. She had always been too ready to wait on his words and trust to his love; the time had come when, as a reasonable being, she must do so no more. The next few weeks would show her his real mind; there was small chance of finding it such as she had at one time believed it to be. She went to the farmhouse, but there was little or nothing to do about the tea; all that had been arranged a week before. Mrs. Heriot said that Audrey looked ill, took her into a comfortable parlour, got her some tea, and made her rest a while; and then they all strolled about the abbey and by the river side again. And later in the day they sat down to a farmhouse tea in the best room, with the rushing river below the windows, confusing their talk, and stacks of girdle cakes, a specialty of the place known by the name of "singing hinnies," placed on the table for

their refecton. Audrey was never very near Brian again, save for a minute's farewell in the evening, when they drove over the long shadows homewards. "*Au revoir*," he had then said. Well, time would show. There had been a wistful tenderness in his eyes as he watched her go. Time would also prove the depth of that.

CHAPTER II.

“Better a little chiding, than a great deal of heart-break.”

SHAKESPEARE.

“Of nyce conscience tooke he no keep.”

CHAUCER.

“AND now, Audrey,” said Dudley the morning after the picnic, “you have been to your picnic, and it is over, and so I will tell you something. You went entirely against my wish and approbation. You need not look distressed, for you did not know that, but I wish you to know now, and that I should not have allowed you to go if George had not all but insisted on it. He has heard, I suppose, about you and that Templemore, for he was quite determined that you should go, and said I was not to prevent your having an opportunity of explanation with him. You must admit this was very magnanimous of George ;

and what is more, he was, as their landlord's son, invited himself, and refused lest his presence should be a check on you."

Audrey hung her head. Kind as George and Dudley were, it was disagreeable to her to have this discussed by them. "I dare say that is why you did not go, Dudley," said she, with some compunction, thinking that he had thus deprived himself of a pleasure.

"No; I hate seeing any one who takes upon himself to look down on me. I go amongst none of them until I am in my place again. But this is not what I want to talk about, Audrey. I am your brother, and I hope an affectionate one. You have seen this man, I suppose. Tell me if you have received any explanation from him?"

"But, Dudley, I have no right to expect such a thing. He seemed to like me at the Cape, and he changed his mind when he came home; that is all."

"No, that is not all! He professed a great deal of affection for you at the Cape. He had, perhaps, a right to draw back afterwards if he liked when your circumstances changed.

though only a mean fellow would have done it, but he had no right to drop our acquaintance as he has done without giving some reason for it. The most common decency demanded that he should behave with courtesy to me. I helped to save his life."

"Depend upon it, he does not forget it, Dudley."

"Forget it! Who cares for such remembrance? You saw him yesterday; what did he say about his behaviour?"

"I did not give him much opportunity of speaking to me. I avoided him; but he did say that his father had been so ill that he had been unable to leave him even for an hour, and that he was coming soon—this week certainly, perhaps to-day."

"His father has not been ill ever since he came home! He is to treat us as he likes, and we are to receive him with smiles when at last he condescends to notice us. No, Audrey, it is my wish that you refuse him admission. Tell your servant to say not at home to him."

"Indeed, Dudley, I cannot do that. If he

comes I must see him. I avoided him yesterday, and now I feel as if I had done wrong. It was very unkind, but I felt so strange and cold."

Dudley shrugged his shoulders.

"He said he was coming," repeated Audrey, humbly.

"Audrey!" said Dudley impatiently, "once for all, tell me your real feeling about this man. Do you still care for him?"

"I am afraid in my heart I do rather, Dudley."

"But you are much hurt by his strange conduct?"

Her face confessed it.

"And if he does not come after this, you will begin to see for yourself that he is unworthy?"

"Yes; because I can't help thinking that his father likes me now, so if he stays away——"

"It is because there is no strong feeling to bring him! My words sound cruel, Audrey, but I speak thus for your sake. Well, be it so; let us wait a while longer

before we judge him, but if he neither comes nor writes before many days are over, I consider that you need not even feel friendly to him."

Audrey bowed her head in some sort of acquiescence with a terribly strong reservation in her heart, for even if she gave him up, could she ever learn to look upon him with complete indifference?

"Poor dear little Audrey!" said he, "you are feeling this a great deal, I am afraid."

"Don't be kind to me, Dudley; don't let us speak of it."

If Dudley was going to talk in that way to her, she felt that she should break down.

"Well, we won't speak of it, but bear in mind that what you are feeling about this Templemore, George, who is a very different man from him, is feeling about you. I should have thought you would have felt some pity for George!"

"George, somehow, is not a man to pity," replied Audrey.

"That is because he is so brave and unselfish. It was his doing that you went

yesterday, and yet if you had come back engaged to Templemore, I believe he would have been a changed man all the rest of his life."

"I am puzzled, Dudley, by your wishing me to accept George. I should have thought that you with your views would have been the last person to desire such a thing. Do you really wish it?"

"I do most distinctly and earnestly wish it, and my prayer and my hope is that you will.' "

"And why?"

On this Dudley in his secret soul was much abashed, for he was forced to own to himself that if his uncle had not supplied a motive for wishing for it, he would have disliked Audrey's marrying George almost as much as he disliked the idea of her marrying Templemore.

"Why? Because he is a good, true, honest man, and if he says he loves you he does love you, and if he means it once, he means it for ever. Now, just compare him with Templemore. However, you must do as you like, only

it is wretchedness itself for me to see you so pale and ill. I remember the time when I had a sister who loved me and would have done anything to please me."

"You have her still," said Audrey, coming closer to him.

"Oh no ; you don't care much for me now."

"Dudley !"

"I am speaking the truth. Well, I must go to my work. Audrey, I have quite enough anxiety without this."

This reproach brought tears into Audrey's eyes, but she adhered to her resolution to wait a while longer before making up her mind to renounce Brian for ever.

Dudley departed to his work, wondering if there was any chance of this man keeping his word for once and coming—wondering whether, if he did so, it would be so very wrong if he himself did something to prevent the meeting taking place. No possible good could come of it—only harm, for even if Brian married Audrey after all, she could never be happy with such a man as he was ; it would surely be well to try to save her

from herself. And then he thought with bitterness that he was troubling himself in vain. Templemore never meant to come, and the sooner Audrey got to know that the better.

And while they were talking in Dorminster, Brian Templemore was dressing, full of a strong determination to go at once to see Audrey and to tell her all. He was only half happy about her, half sure of her. His bad conduct had been too much even for her patience, not a day longer was to be lost; but he saw his own handsome face as he dressed, he remembered the power which he once had over her, and a smile of happy confidence broke over his face as he left his own room and hurried off to his father's.

"I am going to see Miss Wentworth to-day, father," said he. "Wish me luck. You still like the idea of having her for a daughter?"

This he said for the pleasure of hearing an answer in the affirmative.

The squire had no difficulty in saying yes to that query. He liked Audrey, and he wanted to see Brian safely married. And

then Brian went down to order his horse and get his breakfast.

There was a letter amongst the little heap lying by his plate which he took up with a thrill of expectation of something disagreeable. It was in Polly's handwriting. A letter from her, whatever it might contain, was but a bad beginning to the day when he went to ask Audrey to be his wife. He turned it over and over, and eyed it uneasily, with a certain repugnance to opening it; but at last he broke the seal and read—

“DEAR MR. BRIAN,

“This is to tell you what has become of me. You may hear I have run away from the Hall—bad things may be said of me, but you must know from me that they are not deserved by anything I have done. I would have stayed with aunt if I had been able, but after poor Squire Templemore was took so ill, one talked a little and another talked; and it was not that much was said, but something must have come to her ears about you and me meeting, sir, in the park and being found out,

for she cast it up at me times out of number, and told me I was nothing but a whitewashed sepulchre every time she passed me going quietly backwards and forwards about my work.

“And I did try to go about it as usual, sir, but it was hard to put by the thought of you; and many a time I felt so drawn into the park, just for the hope of getting even a peep of the crown of your hat, sir, that I hardly knew how to resist, and twice I got myself set off to take one look over at Breamore; but she was after me both times, before I knew where I was. ‘Haven’t you done enough, you bad, wicked girl?’ said she. ‘You have helped to kill the squire with your ways, and yet you are not content.’ She locked me up in my room after that for two whole days, and knocked hard at the door every time she passed, to show me she was there, and said things through the key-hole at me, reproaching me with having to be shut up there, instead of being about helping her, as I ought to have been; and, poor thing, it was true that if she did not like to see me working with her, she ought to have had some one else.

“So I made up my clothes in a bundle, dropped out of the window, and stole away at three o’clock one morning, before any one was stirring. I took one good look at your house, sir, and went; and it was better I left, for it was hard for me to be so near you and to know I must never see you, and that it was wrong to put myself in your way. Many a time I caught myself trying to persuade myself that I had something to do at the gate when you were likely to go by, that I might see your dear face, and if I had seen it I should have wanted to hear a few words from you; and so it would have gone on from less to more, till all my good resolutions were forgotten, and we should have been seeing each other in the park again.

“No, Mr. Brian, I never could have settled at the Hall. Every day I got worse. I am sure I did right to go away. I tell you where I am; but, Mr. Brian, never come in my way. For pity’s sake, help me to do what is right! Just the very thought of seeing you makes me nearly wild. I should scream with joy, or do something strange if I met you, and that

shows I am better away. Dear Mr. Brian, good-bye! If you see me don't speak to me, don't even look at me. I could not bear either. You don't know how foolish the thought of you makes me; so never come where I am, for I could not contain myself if you did.

"When I left Aunt Susan that morning, I did not know where to go or who would take me in. At last I thought of my dear young mistress, who was so kind to me—Miss Wentworth. So I went to her, and told her I was so unhappy with aunt that I had left her and come to seek a place, and she took me in till I got one; but now she won't let me go until I have got a little stronger.

"Now, farewell, Mr. Brian. I don't want you to be unhappy, sir, but I do hope you think of poor Polly sometimes. Some day I shall have to bear to hear of you loving some one else. Please God, that won't be just yet, for I could not go through that as I am now;" and so the letter ended, without any signature.

Polly living with Audrey! Could anything have been more disastrous? If she was there,

he could not go. "How curiously, how vengefully our sins do find us out!" thought he. He went at once and told his father.

"I'd like to see her letter," said the squire, who had a lurking fear that Brian had not told him the truth about that affair.

The letter was at once given him, and he read it, growing more and more gloomy and grave as he did so; then he laid it down on his knee and seemed full of thought. Brian was waiting for what he would say. His own conscience was not silent; his father's manifest distress deepened its reproaches. His father looked up, as if to seek in his features some confirmation of this new reading of his character. Brian's look of pain touched his pity.

"I am considering what you are to do, Brian; I am sure I don't know what you are to do. How could you be so wicked to this poor girl?"

Brian did not speak.

"Brian, you don't take after me; in all my life I never could bear the sight of a sad face of my making. What are you going to do?"

“I am going to write to Miss Wentworth ; I can’t well go to the house now. Don’t reproach me, father. It is a bad business, I know ; but you must not think that I am not very much distressed about it.”

“If Miss Wentworth were to refuse you, there are many people who would say you ought to marry the other poor girl, and I’ll be hanged if I don’t think there is a great deal to be said on that side.”

And then Brian, much damped by all this, began to write a letter to Audrey, and his letter contained a very earnest assurance of his love for her, and an offer of marriage.

All that day, Dudley was at work in the office in a thoroughly unquiet state of mind. When he got home at night, the very first thing he said to Audrey was, “Well, have you had any visitors ?”

“George was here this afternoon.”

“And no one else ?”

“No one,” replied she, affecting not to know that he was seeking information about Brian Templemore. “I sat an hour or more with Miss Newcomen this morning, and

George came in while I was there, and then home with me, but no one else has been here."

Dudley had the grace not to look too pleased. Then one day had passed safely over.

The next morning, he happened to be alone in the dining-room when the post came. Audrey had run upstairs to get him his gloves. Some impulse made him go to the box, for he was mightily indifferent about the kind of letters which usually came for him; but he went this time and saw Brian Templemore's letter and one other. He knew the former at once by the crest and motto, and a quicker and more decided impulse than that which had made him hurry to the letter-box made him crush this letter into his pocket, for he heard footsteps, and he knew Audrey was coming.

"Any letters for me?" said she.

"Yes, one. Who is it from?"

"It is from Mrs. Heriot."

"Ah!" said Dudley pettishly—his path bristled with unwelcome lovers—"and what can she possibly have to write about?"

"She is coming in to Dorminster for a

day's shopping, she would like to come here to luncheon. We must ask her of course."

"Do nothing of the kind. Did she offer to come to luncheon when she first came to Dorminster? I know quite well why she wants to come now. No—after all, it is my house, Audrey."

Audrey looked up in surprise; Dudley was quite unlike himself. He went to the office, hating what he had done, even though he was almost certain that the truest kindness to Audrey was to keep that letter from her. He could not make himself happy about it; he found it impossible to settle to work, and at last almost determined to slip the letter back in the box at evening post-time, and let his sister have it. But how hard to give up the chance of the marriage with George, and all which that meant of good for himself and for Audrey, for the sake of this Templemore, who did not really love her—who never had loved her!

Who did not really love her! If he could but be sure of that, he would burn the letter at once, without one touch of compunction.

He made an excuse to go out for an hour or so, and went to see Miss Templemore. That lady, though somewhat irritated by Audrey's refusal to have any money either given to her or settled on her, was rapidly taking the place of a family friend. She had a great liking for both the young people, but Dudley was her favourite. She saw in a moment that something was amiss with him, and said—

“I am sure you would not leave off work to come to see me at this time of day if you were not worried about something. What is it?”

“Audrey as usual! She looks so ill, and seems to get worse instead of better.”

“Oh, that is nothing. She will come round in time; don't you worry yourself.”

“I wish I knew what it was right to do with her.”

“Has my nephew begun to come about her again?” asked Miss Templemore with quick suspicion.

“Oh no; he has not been near us; but that young Heriot, empty-headed young idiot

that he is, is always either coming or sending. Why did you let the gossips here know so much? That is what has done it! You should not have let any of them hear of your project of adopting Audrey. It was very kind of you, most kind, to think of it; but no one ought ever to have heard of it but ourselves."

Dudley had disliked its being mentioned even to himself, and his pride had rejoiced in Audrey's prompt declaration, that she would have none of Miss Templemore's money.

"His mother came and asked me point-blank. I could not help telling her; but young Heriot can easily be got rid of. I know she does not care for him. I was afraid it was my nephew."

"Why afraid?" asked Dudley hopefully.

"Because she deserves some one better—some one with a more fixed character. Brian has neither aim nor employment in life. She would never be happy with him."

"Honestly speaking, Miss Templemore, do you think he cares for her?"

“Cares for her! yes—loves her! no.”

“Then you believe her money—— but I ought not to speak of this to you.”

“Oh yes, you ought! I love that child—besides, this is not the first time we have spoken of this. Brian is a very good fellow in some ways, but I like people who can be constant, no matter what happens.”

“So do I. But if he came back to her now, wouldn’t that look like constancy? And what would you advise me to do then?”

“It would be for Audrey to decide, not you,” replied Miss Templemore firmly; “but I don’t know about constancy!—He heard me say I meant to adopt her.”

Each word Miss Templemore said comforted Dudley inexpressibly. What he had done was perfectly right and wholly wise; what remained to do, though bitterly unpleasant, was most clearly his duty.

“Is that young Heriot a great nuisance to you?” inquired Miss Templemore, for still Dudley looked no happier.

“Great! I am tired of his bouquets, and notes, and visits! I wish I could get Audrey

out of the way while he is here. One can't forbid him the house."

"Suppose I take her to Harrogate with me? It will do her good. We will start on Thursday, at half-past eight, and stay six weeks."

"And please let the Heriots and everybody know that she will not have a fortune from you—I must beg you to do that," said Dudley when he had thanked her.

"H'm! We will consider about that," said Miss Templemore. "She can't prevent my doing what I like with my own."

Dudley went back to the office and found it empty. He knew that would not last long, so he took out the letter at once, intending to destroy it. But he neither liked to read it, nor yet to burn it without first getting some idea of its contents. Very reluctantly he peeped inside, and saw that it was an offer of marriage; then he unhesitatingly thrust it into the heart of a glowing red fire, where it seemed to him to remain plainly visible all the day long. "Would it be worth while to give up nearly £80,000 for the sake of a man like Templemore?" he inquired of himself more

than once, when conscience was troublesome. No ; even without contingent advantages, George was worth a thousand such as he, and Audrey would see that for herself some day, and thank him for saving her.

Again Dudley went home ; again he put the question—"Any one been here to-day ?"

Audrey's answer was in a yet more plaintive key.

"Miss Templemore invites you to go to Harrogate with her," said he.

"When, dear ?" asked Audrey carelessly.

"Next Thursday morning, and I mean you to go, mind."

Never before had Dudley spoken to her in this way. Was he going to make her leave Dorminster ? Ah, well ! it wanted six days to Thursday yet, and if Brian neither came nor wrote before six days were over, it was little matter where she went ! She made no protest against this journey. So far, much was gained ; but what if Brian took it into his head to come over to Dorminster and see her for himself ? He had said in his letter that he could not leave his father, but it would not do

to trust to that. Dudley's resources were, however, numerous, and he had no difficulty in making engagements nearly every day for Audrey, which took her out of the house when Brian was likely to come. One day it was a long drive with Osmunda ; another day he got George to drop in and take her out, saying she was moping. And every morning and evening he watched the post, but he did it so artfully, and Audrey was so little in the habit of suspecting any one, that she never noticed that he was nearly always there to empty the box ; and, by way of giving prominence to Brian's unworthiness, each night he asked that cruel question — " Any one been here ? " And each night the wretched girl was compelled to chronicle the visits of the few who came to see her, sick at heart at the thought that the one being in the world whom she most wished to see stayed away.

Polly was still with them. She had not begun to look for a place yet, for, just now, Bridget had taken the opportunity of her being there to pay a visit home ; and Polly, therefore, was useful to them.

Useful, they said and thought ; but if they had known how many half-hours daily were given to woeful contemplation of past, present, and future, the value of her services might have been questioned. The locket Brian had given her she wore in secret, and many a time she opened it and drew out the strangely clipped bit of paper inside it, just for the sake of seeing that dear name, in that dear handwriting : "Brian William Templemore, February 10th, 1847."

One day, after a quarter of an hour spent in this way, she went down to get some work which was in Miss Wentworth's room. At any time Polly moved quietly; doubly so now, when full of sorrow. She entered the room noiselessly, and so suddenly that she surprised Audrey standing by the window looking intently at a piece of paper, which was cut, clipped, and jagged in precisely the same way as that in the locket which she herself had. She felt as if she had seen her own double. It was the same size as her paper, and had some writing on it. She had been dwelling on hers upstairs as a love token ; Audrey

below seemed to be doing the same thing. Polly turned pale, but tried to look as if she had remarked nothing unusual, and advanced to gather together her work and retire. Audrey coloured and hid her indenture, but quickly remembered that she need not be afraid of little Polly—that she could know nothing of what she was doing—so, while saying a few kind words to her, she folded up the paper, placed it in her pocket-book in her desk, and turned the key.

“We must not let you work too hard, Polly,” said she. “You really don’t look well. If you were to take a book and rest a while, it would be better; you used to be fond of reading.”

“I never read now, miss, I can’t settle my thoughts to it; I am better when I am working about.”

“That is just like me,” said Audrey, with an attempt at gaiety; “I have taken it into my head that I can only be happy when I am moving about. This house ought to be the very model of order with two people like you and me to look after it.”

“I don’t think I am much good, miss, either to myself or to any one else,” exclaimed Polly rather ungraciously, retreating as she spoke with her needlework. But her whole mind was filled with a desire to ascertain, by touch and sight, whether the paper her young mistress was looking at had anything to do with that in her own locket. Her jealous, uneasy eyes followed Audrey about all day. Dearly she loved her, but even love was in abeyance while this fear was in her mind.

Dudley was now beginning to dread the arrival of another letter. On the fourth evening after the destruction of the first, Audrey and he were watching the postman going down the opposite side of the street before coming to theirs, when she exclaimed—

“Ah! he is looking across. He has something for us.”

“Most likely,” said he carelessly. “Oh! how my head does ache to-night! I wonder whether a walk would cure it? Suppose we go out a while. Run upstairs, dear, and dress yourself and come with me.”

Audrey was off in a moment, and Dudley

intercepted the second letter. Down came Audrey dressed, just in time to see him withdrawing a newspaper from the box.

“Only a paper!” said she.

“Yes. Wait a moment for me,” said he; for he meant to talk seriously to her while out, and the contents of this letter might influence his conversation. It was a complaint from Brian of having had no answer from her; a renewal of his offer in much warmer language; a hint of a fear that she did not think him worthy even of an answer after his bad conduct to her; an assurance that if she did not reply to this, he should feel that he had lost her because she could not forgive him for what had really been his misfortune, and not his fault.

“Let him feel what he likes!” said Dudley, locking the letter away, and hurrying down. “And now, little Audrey,” said he, “where shall we go?”

They chose some hills at the west of the town, where long ago a fierce battle had been fought against the Scots. The battle had raged in the hollow, and the Prior of Dor-

minster had stood on the hills above, with the banner of St. Frithiof in his hands; and he and his monks had prayed all day long as hard as the men at arms had fought, and to their prayers, and to the presence of the sacred banner, had been ascribed the victory. It was a beautiful bit of unspoiled country, with ranges of grassy hills losing themselves in each other, or when you looked down from any of the frequent paths which ran along their crests, following, meeting, and crossing each other like mounded waves, and falling in long narrow rifts and valleys, through which delicious bits of landscape might be seen framed by the hill-sides. Not seldom the cathedral itself was the picture,—rising square and massive, and rich in kindly colour such as artists love, beyond the steep green slopes of pasture land.

“Now I have got you to myself,” said Dudley, “and now I want to talk to you. Let me say what I like, Audrey; my only motive can be love for you, and somebody must try to set things before you, for you are acting very wrongly by your own health and

happiness. We will consider your health first. You are pale and thin and anxious, and take no pleasure in anything, and are just in the state when an illness might seize upon you and make you an invalid for life. You fret secretly, day and night, and all for something which would ruin your life if you got it. You have your own idea of that man—I have not patience to name him—and you are in love with it. I know exactly the splendid gifts you have bestowed on him, and I know that he is no more like what you fancy him, than this little monk's road is like the Appian Way, though both are paved in much the same fashion."

They were walking in a narrow lane paved with slabs of stone, a relic of the times when the monks of Dorminster made their way to a dependent abbey near. The monks were gone, the abbey a ruined gable, but the road was as good as ever, and the view from it one of the most splendid in the world.

"Oh, Dudley!" said Audrey, in a vain attempt to change the conversation. "Did you ever see anything finer? Look at the western towers!"

“Audrey, I cannot care about any beauty now, or think of anything but you. I am far too miserable about you! And you used not to be so obstinate. I remember the time when, if I had a very strong wish on a subject, I had only to tell you and you always seemed to see things as I did.”

Audrey slipped her hand in his, and looked piteously at him.

“I know I am causing you pain, Dudley, but give me a few days more. I *am* doing my best to see as you do.”

“He is selfish, extravagant, faithless, unstable! You would be a miserable woman, Audrey.”

“I am a miserable woman, Dudley. I dare say you may be right in all you say of him; but think what it must cost me to own that—and perhaps we are wronging him. Wait a few days more.”

“Well, wait a few days more, but it is only protracting your pain.”

And now, from the high monk’s road, they stood watching the last gleams of the sunset. The cathedral saw the last of it, and kept

hold of its crimsons long after all else had resigned itself to be grey ; but the time came when it too looked cold and wan. They stood watching this gradual change until pale mists floated in the hollows of the hills below them, and hung above the river till its strangely winding course could be traced by their heavy folds ; and the mists blended with the low-lying smoke of neighbouring collieries, until all the distance was hid by wreaths of dusky lilac and obscured rose colour. This obscurity crept nearer and nearer, and the air, laden with autumn exhalations, grew more and more dank and unhealthy, until all at once Dudley was aroused by hearing Audrey coughing very frequently, and remembered that the doctor had said, after her illness in the spring, that she must be especially careful to begin the next winter well, for another bad cold might be the forerunner of a disease beyond all control. Dudley hurried her through the fields and lanes, and back into the streets. In one of the most crowded stood a house with all its rooms well lighted.

“That is one of George’s houses,” said he.

Audrey had never heard of George's houses, and did not know that he, taking to heart the large amount of crime and drunkenness in his native town, had, in his anxiety to do something to lessen it, hired houses in the worst districts, made them warm and comfortable, and supplied them handsomely with newspapers and books; and then, finding that many of those for whom they were intended were unable to read, had organized a staff of readers, who humoured the men who came to the rooms and read what they liked, sending them home night after night with heads filled with some pleasant subject of contemplation, instead of stupefaction or fury caused by drugged beer or spirits.

“There is crime enough still,” said Dudley; “but, at any rate, George has kept a certain number of these men safe, and that is something to rejoice over. He is looked upon as their guardian angel by these men's wives and mothers; and he has a savings bank of his own, which he manages himself, and gives them all five per cent. on their money. But how you are coughing, Audrey!”

“Oh no ; it is nothing. But they are singing now.”

“Yes ; he pays people to teach them drawing and singing.”

“What a dear fellow George is !” said Audrey.

“I should have thought you would have found him so. I wonder, Audrey, how it is you are not——”

“I did not mean, dear, in that way,” said Audrey impatiently ; and another fit of coughing made him hurry her home still more quickly.

CHAPTER III.

“Small mischiefs are by greater made secure.”

VITTORIA COROMBONA.

“See how belief may suffer by foul show.”

SHAKESPEARE.

AUDREY had been ill in bed for three days with a violent cough and cold; Polly was her nurse. She gave her her medicines—was patient, affectionate, and untiring; but there was hardly one moment of those days during which the thought of that bit of paper in the pocket-book which lay in Audrey's desk, and the desire to see it, were absent from her mind. Suddenly, about dusk on that third day, her opportunity came, and, overpowered by her eagerness to know the worst at once, she used it. Audrey exclaimed, “Polly, I wish you would go into my store-room for me, to get me a box of night-lights you will see there.

Here, open my desk, and you will find the store-room key lying at the top."

The desk was on a table near the door; the room was growing dark, and the curtain of Audrey's bed was drawn on that side. Polly opened the desk. There, lying at the very top, was not only the key, but the pocket-book which held that bit of paper about which she had now tormented herself for three whole days. She could not get the key without touching the book. Would it be so very wrong to take one look at the paper? One look would be enough.

"Leave the desk open, Polly, till you come back, and then you can put the key in its place again," said Audrey.

Without giving herself one moment to repent her resolution, Polly took the pocket-book downstairs with her. First she got the night-lights out in case of a sudden recall, and then, with beating heart and eyes half blinded by excitement and shame at her own perfidy, she opened the note-book, and there was the paper folded very small in a tiny pocket in the cover. Ah! inch for inch, and mark for mark,

it seemed the very counterpart of her own ; and when she unfolded it and read, "Etheldreda Wentworth, February 10th, 1847," she knew in a moment, only too well, that the date was the same as that on hers. Then Brian William Templemore and Etheldreda Wentworth had been together on the 10th of February, and there had been little thought then of poor Polly ? How cruel of Brian to deceive her so ! And yet, how he had loved her before he went away to the Cape ! He could not have changed so soon ! He must have been led away by Miss Wentworth's fortune. Much as Polly disliked admitting him to be capable of that, it was better than thinking he could really have loved Audrey. She did not believe that he ever had done so in his heart. She herself was the one whom he had loved both first and last ; and even if he had cared a little bit for Miss Wentworth in between, he might have owned it to her. She loved him quite enough to be able to forgive him that, or anything. Anything but deceiving her, and he had deceived her.—Over and over again she had asked him if he had ever cared for any one but

herself, and he had always answered, "No ; I have never loved any one but you, little Polly." She felt very faint. If she were to faint and be found there with Miss Wentworth's pocket-book in her hand ! What had she done ? A blush of shame rose to her face : she would replace the paper, return the note-book, and get far away from the sight of Miss Wentworth and all chance of ever meeting Brian again as quickly as she could. But as she folded up Audrey's indenture, it occurred to her that it and her own were cut from the same sheet of paper, and would fit together if joined. It was so. Point for point, the two locked into each other ; and when she saw that, tears crowded to her eyes, and she believed much more in their having been lovers, for lovers divided rings and coins and things of all kinds between them. But if those two had really been lovers, even the small amount of happiness which had fallen to her own lot before had not truly been hers.

There was a loud ring at the door, and even in her distress she remembered that she must replace the note-book before Mr. Wentworth

got in, or she might lose all opportunity of doing so. Without a second's loss of time, crushing back all her rage and grief, she ran upstairs with it, put it and the key back in the desk, and then, after a word of explanation to Audrey, ran downstairs to open the door for him. That done, she crept away to find her own indenture, which, in her haste and confusion, she had left on the kitchen table. She took it with some solemnity, folded it up carefully, and placed it in the locket with the manner of one bidding an eternal farewell. "Now," said she, "I know what you mean, and I need never think to get any comfort from looking at you again." All that evening she was wretchedly miserable. Sometimes she thought she would never wear that locket, or care for it again, for what was it but a golden case for a memento of another woman? At others her heart leapt with triumph, for the very fact that Mr. Brian had given it to her proved that he loved her best after all. So she wore it still in secret, quite unconscious that in her haste she had changed the two papers, and was now bearing the one which

had the name of Etheldreda Wentworth on it about with her, while that which used to be in Brian's locket was now in Audrey's desk.

Polly was not the only person in that house who was unhappy; Dudley, too, was tormented by doubt and anxiety. If Audrey had not been better this day, he must have told her all, have sacrificed his future and hers, and have let her throw herself away on Brian Templemore, for he could not have suffered her to fade away before his very eyes. But he believed this illness to be what it was—the result of the final struggle of her all but extinct love for Brian with her conviction that he was entirely unworthy of confidence. Let her but once get away with Miss Templemore to some cheerful place amongst new scenery and new people, and she would come home ready to be happy in any way that he, her far-seeing brother, thought best for her. He had carried this most unpleasant business through so far—was he to give in when his object was so nearly attained, unless Audrey's health was seriously threatened? Another might have thought her health seriously

threatened already, for the doctor looked very grave about her, and said that he was afraid she would be very delicate for some time to come.

“She is going to Harrogate with a friend,” said Dudley, “when she is well enough. Don’t you think that will do her good?”

“No; it is too cold for her—far too cold! She must go to some warm place, and she will require great care all the winter.”

“My friend will go anywhere you like to fix—she said she would. But you are sure my sister will soon be all right again if we take care?” said Dudley anxiously.

“Oh yes, if you only take care,” said the doctor, and went.

And Dudley, who knew with what placid tranquillity a doctor will tell you that you are doing very well one day, and perhaps admit to your friends on the very next that your case has been hopeless from the first, took fright and thought he would go and talk to Audrey, and resolved that if she said anything which implied she was breaking her heart about Brian, she should no longer be parted

from him. He was not afraid of her finding out about the letters; she would easily believe that they had miscarried. Anything would be better than to let her make herself really ill. He went to her at once with some searching questions. "Was she fretting about Templemore?"

There was such heartfelt concern in Dudley's face, that Audrey felt herself a selfish creature who made those dear to her wretched because she had missed something which it was not well for her to have, and answered accordingly.

"No, dear, I am not fretting about him or anything; I am only rather ill with my cold."

"Ah! You are sure? You don't know how miserable your illness makes me."

"I am much better, Dudley; I am going to get up to-morrow."

"And you will promise, for my sake, to make an effort to forget this man?"

"I do. I cannot quite forget him, Dudley, but I see that it would be a good thing if I could, and I am thinking about him as little as ever I can,—much less than I used to do."

“Thank God!” said Dudley. “And you will still go away with Miss Templemore when you are well enough? She has been very good. She is waiting till you can go.”

“Let me stay here, Dudley,” pleaded Audrey, who had the greatest dread of leaving home now. She felt just like a poor wounded animal whose only wish is to creep into a corner and lie down in quiet.

“No. Say you will go, little Audrey; come, darling, I should be happier if you would.”

She hesitated a minute, but Dudley’s anxious face was too much for her; she threw her arms round his neck, and said, “Yes; tell her I’ll go anywhere she likes.”

Miss Templemore came next morning, and Audrey told her so herself. That lady could not help observing Polly’s listless manner and heavy looks. They were, indeed, noticeable, for all love for Audrey had gone out of the girl. She served her with coldness, did what was necessary, but did it as for one who had somehow been a party to deceiving her.

“A silly fine lady of a girl!” thought Miss Templemore. “I believe she is of no use.

Audrey, you must have some chicken broth to-day. Send your servant out for a chicken, tell her what she is to give for it, and let her bring it back with her."

"Polly cannot well go; there is no one to go to the door if any one comes. I need not have it to-day—she can get it in the evening."

"Nonsense!" said Miss Templemore. "You must have it to-day, and Polly, or whatever her name is, must go. If any one rings at the bell, I'll open the door. Do you think Elizabeth Templemore has got to this time of life and is afraid of showing her face at the door in case of need? Yes, and I have a cap on my head too, which is more than some people have!" said she, with a savage glance at Polly's head-dress. "Now, Polly, go at once, and let me see how quickly you can come back. It is a quarter past eleven now, you ought to be back at a quarter to twelve; one-and-sixpence is plenty to give for a chicken to make broth of. Come, be quick; go as you are, and don't spend time in dressing."

Polly, with much inward vexation, erased Miss Templemore's name from the list of possible mistresses and went, and was quickly in the midst of all the confusion of the market.

What a crowd there was—women with hard elbows, using them to squeeze their way about with their awkward market baskets full of butter and eggs; others with strings of unhappy live fowls dangling heads downwards from vigorous arms; and buyers and sellers haggling and bargaining, while idle spectators struggled with them for a footing. Polly's mind was so full of other things, that she had forgotten all about the chance of meeting her aunt, till suddenly she heard her well-known voice.

“Well, you are set up, to be sure! Can nothing serve you to go out to market in but that good shawl? I can tell you I meant it for something better nor that when I gave it to you!”

Polly was so used to be scolded by her aunt that this speech, taken in conjunction with a twinkle of her eye when it rested on

her, appeared in the light of a friendly greeting ; and the fact was, the fierce old lady was glad to see her, and glad to know she was still with the Wentworths.

“Where can I get a chicken for eighteen-pence ?” asked Polly.

“Nowhere to-day, unless you have to deal with a fondy,” said her aunt contemptuously.

All this time a girl with Mrs. Pemberton—who was, as Polly well knew, the Templemores’ housemaid, Esther Murray—was making signs to her that she had some communication of importance to make, and now she said, “There’s Peggy Walker has chickens ; ask her what she’ll take for them ;” and she led Polly aside and whispered as she went, “I have something to tell you. Get what you want, and I’ll set you home.”

Peggy Walker, a grasping-looking woman, reluctantly agreed to let Polly have what she wanted for one and eightpence, and selected a venerable bird from her store ; but before the bargain was completed, the saleswoman’s attention was absorbed by the sight of the inspector of the markets and his scale-bearing

attendant in her immediate neighbourhood. It was this man's duty to pounce unawares on any butter which was of light weight, and confiscate it if really wanting in honest proportions, and Peggy Walker was afraid to-day of his eyes and his scales, for she was only too conscious that her butter was far from being able to bear the test. Hastily, and as she thought unseen by the girls, she slipped a half-crown or two into each of the three or four pounds in her basket, smoothing over the point of admission with her finger, so that what she had done defied detection. Though she could not of course make her pounds look bigger, she was now more easy about their weight; and when the inspector, who had appeared to be moving away in another direction, suddenly turned round close by her, and proceeded to weigh one of her pounds, she saw him take it calmly, had indeed heart for the contemptuous remark: "You have a deal of idle time on your hands if you begin weighing *my* butter!"

But when he said, "That wants an ounce!" and handed it to the boy behind, and so on

till every pound she had and all those silver treasures inside were gone, her grief and anger knew no bounds. Grief and anger being useless, she cried for mercy :—her scales were out of order ;—she would forfeit some money—she would do anything but consent to lose her butter ; and that cry being useless, and all being useless, she turned to Polly and said, “Go you about your business ! I should like to know how you have the face to ask me to sell you a good chicken like that for one and eightpence after the loss I’ve had with that thief carrying off all my butter. Light weight, indeed ! Go away, I say !”

Polly did go away, and her aunt said, “Here, Polly, take this chicken to Miss Wentworth, with my best respects. Be quiet ! I want no pay for it. Do you think I am going to take money from Miss Wentworth ? Good-bye. When you like to come back and behave somehow conformable, you can. Meantime, do your best where you are.”

“And now, honey, do come,” said Esther Murray ; “come, I am tied to be back in the market at one o’clock.”

“And I was tied to be back at our house at a quarter to twelve, and it’s better than half-past now.”

“Well,” said Esther, “everybody knows now about you and our young master!”

“Mind your own business, Esther!” said Polly indignantly, “I won’t have one word said about that.”

“Nay, that is not the way to treat me; I’ll be bound if you only heard a few words more of what I have got to say, you would be ready to go down on your knees to beg me to go on faster with telling it.”

Polly’s cheeks flushed, and her eyes were fixed anxiously on Esther; but she found it difficult to overcome her dislike to hearing her speak of this.

Esther saw that she was too proud to show any curiosity, and said, “Well, we’ve no time to lose over nonsense, and so you must know that a while ago our young master got a letter from a young woman whose name wasn’t Polly and who wasn’t a bit fond on him, so you have no occasion to perk up about it. She had just gone to live at Wentworth’s in

Dorminster here, and she wanted him not to come follering after her, and wrote to tell him so. Be quiet, Polly! I never said it was you—I said it wasn't, and I've my story to tell, so you hold your tongue. Well, the very day this letter came to Breamore, Squire Templemore—master, you know—was just wanting Mr. Brian to get his horse and ride over to Dorminster to see Miss Wentworth and court her, and Mr. Brian he says, says he, 'Father, you must see for yourself that I can't do that—think of Polly!' and the squire he took the letter and read it, and then there was a great deal of talk between them, and the squire said he must go and propose to Miss Wentworth, but that he ought to marry Polly."

Polly fairly gasped for breath. "Esther," said she, "you are inventing this, and it is very wicked of you! How can you be so cruel?"

"It is all as true as that I am standing here. The squire told Mr. Brian that he had behaved very ill to you, and that he ought to marry you. Don't go out of your seven senses, girl!"

“No,” said Polly, but she could hardly breathe—“and—what did Mr. Brian say? Esther, tell me that.”

“I think he was pleased about what master said about you, but I could not rightly catch what he said.”

“You are sure you heard nothing? Did you not hear anything he said?”

“Nothing at all, not one thing.”

“But are you telling me rightly about the squire? Say it over again—use his very words.”

“I can’t tell you his very words—well, yes, perhaps I can. Let’s see. This is it, I think: ‘There’s many a one would say, Brian, that if Miss Wentworth refused you, you ought to marry that other poor girl, and I’ll be hanged if I don’t think so too.’”

“And Brian—Mr. Brian, I mean?” asked Polly with painful eagerness.

“Nay, that’s all. I could not hear what he said—I told you that before.”

“What is the use of coming and telling me things and leaving the very best part out that way?” exclaimed Polly, as she turned away in bitter vexation and disappointment.

“ You know what the squire said, why could you not know the rest? And, by-the-by, Esther, how do you know anything about it? I never thought of that before, but how do you?” And she looked so proud and so surprised at this, now that the idea had occurred to her, that Esther felt half abashed. Only for a moment, however, for she had in her opinion done nothing but what was right, and answered—

“ Well, they were in the room and I was dusting the door outside.”

“ And you listened? For shame!”

“ Oh, then, if you don't like it, you need hear no more. I am not by myself, I can tell you, in just taking a little notice of what people inside the rooms are saying sometimes, but nobody forces you to hear it.”

“ Ah no! Esther, tell me—I can't bear the thought of listening, but it is done, and what you heard touches me so closely—tell me all—do.”

“ Nay, I have no more to tell,” said Esther sulkily. “ You took care not to speak till you had heard everything.”

“Dear Esther, don’t be vexed—I am so unhappy—don’t be unkind to me. You are sure the squire seemed willing for him to marry me?”

“Quite sure.”

“And you don’t remember what Mr. Brian said to that? Try, Esther.”

“It is no use trying—I did not hear. Just at that moment I remembered it was very wrong to listen, and stopped.”

“You are only mocking me,” said Polly in despair. “Esther, you might be kinder about it; I would not go on in that way with you.”

“Well,” replied Esther, softened, “I really did not hear another word. I only know master made Mr. Brian go and write a letter to Miss Wentworth then and there. That was the offer, I’ll warrant you.”

Polly sighed deeply.

“But no answer has ever come,” continued Esther, in a reassuring voice. “I am a’most sure of that—there’s been a great carry on about getting the letter-bag every morning, but I’m a’most sure there’s never been an

answer from her. The squire said himself, yesterday, that if there was no letter to-day he meant to drive over some day soon, and see Miss Audra' himself."

Polly had a moment of delightful hope ! Miss Audrey had had no letter—she was almost sure of that. Perhaps Brian had never really written to her ; perhaps he had only pretended to do so to satisfy his father, while in his heart he still loved his poor Polly best, and was keeping himself true to her.

She went home, and Miss Templemore gave her a frightful scolding for being so long in coming, but she hardly heard a word of it. She was so excited by her own imagination, so elated by the idea that under certain circumstances the squire was willing to let Brian marry her, that she was almost beside herself. Miss Templemore was obliged to superintend the preparation of the fowl ; had she not done so, it would have been forgotten. And when she went away Polly danced and sang, and arranged her dress, which of late she had rather neglected ; but now, if there was any chance of her regaining Brian, she became

once more valuable in her own eyes. Hours passed—hours during which she was by turns exalted to heaven, or depressed to the lowest depths of despair; for how could she ever be restored to Brian if the squire was so set upon his proposing to Miss Wentworth? Or perhaps that was only a form he wished his son to go through; perhaps they knew Miss Wentworth would refuse him? She did not know what to think.

Polly took no note of time, but about five o'clock there was a ring at the bell; and when she went to the door, Squire Templemore was standing outside, asking for Miss Wentworth. There stood the man who, according to Esther, had so very lately professed his readiness to receive her as a daughter. She raised her eyes timidly to his, and tried to discover in his face some confirmation of what she had heard, but there was no evidence of any feeling with regard to herself which she could interpret. He looked a hard little man of business, who was not to be turned from his object of seeing Audrey. Polly felt herself pushed away in a moment

into quite another world. "He looks on me as if I were nothing more than the ground under his feet!" thought she bitterly; but she obliged herself to answer calmly, and was glad that the simple truth would be so disappointing to him.

"Miss Wentworth is not well, sir. She cannot see you."

"Bless my soul! is she? I am very sorry for that."

And he cast a look of perplexity at the carriage, as if anxious for counsel from some one inside it. Polly thought perhaps it was Brian, but she was mistaken, for no one was there.

"Has she been ill long?"

"Oh no, sir! Just for a day or two; she is not very ill now, only not able to receive visitors."

"Is she confined to her own room?"

"Yes, sir."

"But able to read and write and amuse herself?"

"Oh yes, sir."

"Well, I must call again. Tell her that

we have been hoping to hear from her—that I am very sorry she is ill. Please say that I came, wishing for a pleasant chat with her, and that my son meant to follow me here in half an hour—but we will come again in a day or two. Give her my card and tell her so with my kind regards. Here, take my son's card too. There, my girl, be very sure to give her these cards and my messages; and now——”

He made a sign to the coachman, who brought a basket of grapes and a large quantity of flowers out of the carriage.

“There!” said the squire, as Polly took them. “She is not too ill to enjoy flowers—take them to her, please, and tell her all I say.”

Polly looked stupefied, and turned from the squire to the carriage, from the carriage to the squire. The flowers and the messages to Audrey embarrassed her; they seemed to have got into the way of something which ought rather to have been said—of something which filled her mind entirely.

The squire saw that she looked utterly be-

wildered, and was rather doubtful whether she would remember all his messages. He supposed that she was afraid of his being angry with her about Brian, and that was why she seemed so strange.

“There,” said he, “run away to your mistress, my girl, and don’t be afraid of me or anybody; I’m not cross with you.”

He hardly knew what he said, but he wished it to be something kind—the girl’s nervousness made him so sorry for her.

When he went she put all the flowers and fruit on the dining-room table, and stood looking at them. The Breamore sun had shone upon them, and she could have stood gazing at them all day. Brian had not come! It was the squire who was the wooer! Brian’s heart was not in it; Brian’s heart was her own! Ah! if the squire would but give this up! Ah! if there was no Miss Audrey to stand between her and happiness!

“Where have all these things come from?” said a voice.

It was Mr. Wentworth’s. He had come in by the open door. Polly had never shut

the street door. She thought when she looked at him that he would be sure to see in her eyes where they had come from, so conscious was she of the one thought—Brian. She stammered out something which Dudley was quick to understand.

“Oh, Mr. Templemore brought them? Any message?”

“They are for Miss Audrey; I am just going to take them to her;” and Polly began to gather up her fragrant burden.

“No, no! they shall not go upstairs. I don’t wish Miss Wentworth to have them, or to be told anything about them. The Templemores did not choose to call upon us when we were close by them at Minster-acres, and I don’t choose to be patronized by them now. Mary, can I trust you to be silent about this visit and these presents? I have other reasons for wishing them kept secret, which I need not give you.”

“He knows Mr. Brian does not care for her, and that it is all the squire’s doing, and he is going to put a stop to it,” thought Polly, and her heart gave a great leap of joy

at this unexpected help. And then she thought of Audrey, who had always been so kind to her. But what right had Miss Audrey to try to get Brian's love away from her? Besides, if Brian was doing his best to get out of this for her sake, it was her duty to help him.

"You don't speak, Mary," said Dudley. "I wish to know if I can rely on you not to mention this to Miss Wentworth or any one?"

"You can, Mr. Wentworth," replied Polly in a very subdued voice.

"And if any of the Templemore family call again, I wish you to say that Miss Wentworth cannot see them. Their visits do her harm, and I wish her to be denied to them and to the Heriots too."

"Yes, sir."

Dudley looked at her in some surprise; he had expected her to make more difficulties.

"Now, don't assure me downstairs that you will say nothing of this and then go straight upstairs and tell everything to Miss Wentworth."

“I will say nothing to her, sir.”

“And if Mr. Templemore or his son come again, you are to say ‘not at home’ to them. No person of the name of Templemore is welcome in my house except Miss Templemore. You are to say ‘not at home’ to all the others; and you are not to let my sister know if they call. And another thing: mind this, you are not to carry any notes to her if they write any.”

Polly’s heart grew lighter and lighter; the stars in their courses were fighting for her. Nobody wished for this marriage but the squire, and perhaps he did not care so very much about it. As for Audrey—Polly could not give up Brian to her, especially now, when, as she really believed, he was trying to be constant to herself.

Dudley was rather puzzled by the girl’s willing acquiescence, but all he could make out was that he could trust her; and then he went back to the office, which he had only left because he had seen the Templemores’ carriage in the High Street, and thought the danger of a visit imminent.

CHAPTER IV.

“In the dark
Groped I to find out them : had my desire ;
Finger’d their packet.”

HAMLET.

“Allas ! why plaguen folk so in comune,
Of purveance of God, or of fortune,
That yeveth him ful ofte in many a gyse
Wel better than they can himself devyse ?”

CHAUCEER.

AFTER six weeks spent with Miss Templemore in various picturesque places in the south of England, Audrey returned to Dorminster in the middle of November. She was very well while away, but caught cold on her way home, and soon gave cause for anxiety again. Dudley took alarm at once, and insisted on her confining herself entirely to the drawing-room and her own bed-room. This was not really necessary, but when she promised to do so, he

felt that her safety was ensured in more ways than one, and never ceased congratulating himself on having chosen a drawing-room which did not look towards the street.

A week after her return, she was persuaded into accepting George—persuaded is the right word, for she did not yet know that the feeling which she had throughout owned to, of being always happier when he was there, always able to tell him her secret thoughts, and trust implicitly to his good counsel, had anything to do with love. She thought it mere family affection, and, when he asked her to marry him, would much have preferred to stay as they were, for she did not feel that she could ever really love any one again. She accepted him partly out of pity for him, and partly because of her intense anxiety on Dudley's account. He declared that nothing but this marriage could restore his peace of mind; that he was wretched about Audrey's health; that the doctor said a winter abroad was the only thing to restore her—and here was George, ready to leave all and go where she liked; and if she refused such an offer, it was because

she wished to die and kill him too. Audrey did not wish to die, but was quite sure that she should do so, and that all they wanted to do for her would be in vain; and when George begged her to accept him, she wondered at his attaching any value to such a wreck as she felt herself to be. If he were made so very unhappy by her refusal, if he clung so to the wish that she should marry him, then she would marry him; there was so very little life left to her that it was little matter what she did. And she had her reward when she did accept him, and even felt a certain happiness in hearing him say, "Now, my own darling, so help me God, I will do my best to make you happy." And Dudley's face was radiant with contentment, and old Mr. Copeland blossomed out into a renewal of his youth; and when she saw the happiness she had brought amongst them, she thought it would indeed have been a pity if she had, in a surly manner, refused to act according to their wishes. And she did love George in a quiet way.

Dudley had settled that the wedding was to

take place in one month's time. Even that seemed to be deferring her departure from England too long; they were afraid that she would think this very sudden. But when she was told, she said she preferred that it should be done quickly. The truth was, she wished it over. When once she was married, she would forget the past and begin life afresh.

He came in every evening, and Audrey looked forward to his visit as the happy event of her day. Her days had not many events of any kind now to mark them. Dudley compelled her to stay upstairs with no wider range than from her bed-room to the drawing-room. She could not go to see Miss Newcomen, and her own visitors were few in number. Bridget had come back, but Polly was still with them. Not till Audrey was married and gone could Dudley afford to do without Polly, for she was always there to run to the door, and absolutely firm to her promise to deny her mistress to all Templemores but one, and all Heriots whatever. Brian and his father had called while Audrey was away, had been told that she was

from home, and that her return was uncertain; and when they asked for her address, were informed that she was moving about, that if they liked to send any letter to the house Mr. Dudley would forward it, but that even Mr. Dudley did not always know where to write to.

Audrey had so few acquaintances, and so much care had been taken to shroud her movements in mystery, that Mr. Templemore did not know that she was with his sister, or he might have discovered a method of communicating with her; as it was, all he could say was, "I will call again." On that occasion Brian and Polly had stood face to face. He had kept back a little, and left his father to be spokesman; but he had been obliged to recognize Polly as an old acquaintance, and how the few words which he said to her had scattered all her hopes and imaginations, and brought home to her the bar which was placed between them! He might treat her as he chose, recognize her or not, it was her place to be the submissive servant, to take her tone from him, and give suitable

answers to any questions which he chose to put. She called her pride to her aid, and endeavoured to treat him with indifferent coldness, but it cost her an hour spent in tears, and procured for Audrey some very unpleasant answers, which she, being a kindly soul, took as evidence that the poor girl was very unhappy.

Audrey herself was comparatively happy. She rested peacefully on George and Dudley's affection, feeling how good these two great, big, strong men were to trouble so about a poor little sickly girl, who had been such a care to them for so long; and she strove to make them forget the past, and was gay and affectionate. She did not treat George quite as a lover, but she felt infinite respect and affection for him, and there was no incident of the past, no feeling of the present, which she cared to hide from him. She had told him all the circumstances of that hopeful, hopeless time when she had loved Brian; and one night she came to him and said—

“George, I have been putting that bit of paper—the indenture, you know—which I

told you about into an envelope, and I am going to send it back to Mr. Templemore as I promised. I don't quite like doing it, but he made me promise so solemnly I would, that I suppose I had better send it."

"All right, Audrey, if you wish it, though I don't think him worth the trouble—but," said he, drawing her near to him and kissing her, "you must please to understand that I won't give you up to anybody now, if I can help it."

"What do you mean? What has sending it back to do with that?"

He explained what he believed to have been Brian's intention in exacting that promise, and Audrey's heart beat a little faster, for if Brian were to come now! There was a minute or so when she thought, in wild excitement, of the chance of his coming and saying, "All the past has been one long series of cruel mistakes, my Audrey. Here I am to say I love you, and that I have never for a moment ceased to do so." If that happened? If he came and said that?

How could that happen? How could thorns bring forth figs, or thistles grapes? How could

she ever have from Brian Templemore anything but falseness and cruelty? She saw George's earnest eyes watching her; he no doubt saw the short mental struggle, but his expression remained good, true, and steadily affectionate. She turned to him and put her hand in his, and said, "Dear George, shall I send it or not? I begin to think that I had better not—only I promised."

"I think you had better not send it, but if you have any feeling in favour of doing so, do as you like—I will post it for you."

"No," said she with a shiver; "not you! I have it here in my pocket, but I don't want *you* even to touch it—I like to keep you and everything connected with that entirely apart."

Then, by way of showing that she had been perfectly true to him while doing it, she said, "I did not look at it, George; I only wrapped the indenture in a piece of paper and put it in an envelope—that was all. It is a very long time now since I have looked at that paper."

He clasped the hand she had given him more tightly in his, and said, "My own dear Audrey,

let us always feel that we are each other's best friends, and always trust each other with every thought as now."

And while he spoke she coughed, and there was something in her cough which chilled him to the heart.

"Listen, little Audrey," said he in a cheerful tone, for he feared to alarm her; "let me tell you all the places I want to take you to. We will go to the Riviera, and then to Venice, or Florence, or Naples, or Sicily, or anywhere you like, but we won't come back till all cold winds are over. Don't you like the idea of seeing warm sunshine, and flowers, and ripe oranges, and all the things we English condense into a picture of Italy?"

"I do," said Audrey. "Even the names have a power over one."

All that was good henceforth was going to come from George. Dudley had always loved her, but George was if anything even more sympathetic than Dudley.

And yet Dudley was even at that very moment watching over Audrey's true interests, and superintending the arrival of the evening

post. He knew that Brian would be very likely to hear that she had returned to Dorminster, and thought that he might be tempted to make one last attempt to approach her. And he was right; that very evening came a letter in the well-known writing with the well-known postmark, and he got it. But Polly had seen it first, and Polly saw him take it.

She was growing very thin and pale, and her eyes were haggard and wild, and the wreck in her moral nature was as great as that in her physical. She hated herself for the part which she was playing; shame and grief were killing her. She was tossed about in a whirlwind of passion, not knowing what to cling to, or whom to trust in. She could have lived a life of martyrdom for Brian's sake; she could have borne perpetual separation from him for the sake of duty, but the thought of being betrayed by him drove her to madness. And yet she had no certainty as to what he was doing or thinking. Perhaps he, as well as Audrey, knew little of what was said or done in his name. She longed to see for herself what he wrote to Miss Wentworth. Did he

write like a lover who wished to marry her, or only as a lover turned into a lover by his father's entreaties would do? If the latter, joy and hope had not wholly forsaken Polly, for now Miss Wentworth's rivalry was nearly over, and when once she was married the way to happiness might possibly open. For Polly never forgot what the squire had said.

In the small hours of that night she stole into Dudley's dressing-room, even in spite of the risk of being discovered by him, for the dressing-room was a mere closet with a half-closed door leading into his bedroom. She spent a very long time in entering it noiselessly and feeling her way carefully in the dark till she touched his coat. She carried this away with her, and found the letter. Dudley had opened it very, very carefully himself, for he meant to send it back to Mr. Templemore as if unread. She read it, and she saw in every word and line that the Brian she loved so much worshipped another woman. As for herself, he had only been amusing himself with her—and she had loved him with her whole heart for years!

She replaced the coat with the same care that she had used in removing it, but she never went to bed that night; and next morning Bridget Maloney was not far wrong when she said, "It seems to me that girl Polly is fairly going out of her mind." Stonily she went through her work, too much hurt to shed a tear, or to apprehend much that was said to her. She dreaded, nay, she almost hated the sight of Audrey. And yet attendance on Audrey was just the work which was most absolutely assigned to her; for Miss Maloney was never so truly happy as when she was knocking pans and kettles about in the kitchen, and running here and there with a thick woollen apron on, feeling that there was no occasion for her to "mind the bell" or go "into the rooms" at all. So Polly minded the bell, and went about the house with her poor heart aching with pain, and eyes heavy with looking inwards.

"Polly," said Audrey with anxious kindness, "you don't look very well."

"I am quite well, thank you, miss," replied Polly coldly, and with no interest in her own health.

“You do not look so. It seems so absurd for me to be shut up here in a warm, comfortable room, and for you, who are far more ill than I am, to be going about. Bring your needlework here, Polly, after you have done what I am going to ask you to do, and sit quiet for a while.”

“I like moving about better, thank you, miss. I am not ill.”

“She is ill, poor thing,” thought Audrey, “but I suppose she must have her own way. Will you take this letter to the post for me, Polly, at once?”

Polly took the letter from her, though Brian’s name written by Audrey, which she caught sight of, seemed to burn her fingers.

“Go at once, please, Polly,” said Audrey, fancying that she was hesitating about some question of work or time.

She was indeed hesitating, for she was thinking why should she be employed thus in building up her own misery? Besides, posting that letter was quite incompatible with her promise to Mr. Wentworth. She took refuge in that promise, and as she

silently and sullenly went away to dress to go out, she determined that the letter must not be sent. It would undo, and perhaps reveal, all that had been done already, and put the finishing touch to the destruction of her own hopes. Her hopes were most pitifully slender, but if she had not a shadow of a hope in the world, why should she be the means of crowning Brian's disloyalty to herself with success?

She went to the post, filled up the full measure of walking there, going up to the very letter-box, even took out the letter and held it inside the opening made to receive the letters, that she might be able to say she had put it in the box. She had a curious servant-like feeling that doing that made her seem to be speaking the truth. Then she returned home, and, to escape all questions, walked quickly past the drawing-room door, where, as she rightly divined, Dudley was confining his sister on parole, to keep her out of the way of meeting or hearing of Brian Templemore. Polly hoped her mistress would ask no questions about that letter. But she was mistaken, for Audrey had a nervous feeling about it

—that it must go because she had made so many promises to send it; and so she called her in when she heard her step outside.

“Have you posted the letter, Polly?”

“Yes, miss, I went; I have just come back?”

“And you are sure you put it in the right place?”

“Quite sure; I put it in the letter-box.”

“And you heard it drop down inside?”

Yes, Polly had heard it drop down inside, for all her other senses having become liars, hearing was forced to go too; but this, she admitted to herself, was a lie, and she felt the degradation of telling it grievously, and coloured most painfully.

“Little Polly,” said Audrey very kindly, “I am so sorry to see you so ill. When I have a house of my own, I mean to have you to be my own maid, and then I can take care of you myself. I am afraid it is the town air which does you harm. You have never been well since you came.”

“No more I have,” said Polly, with a rush of self-pitying tears. “But don’t you worry

yourself about me, Miss Audrey; I am not worth it."

"Oh, but, Polly, you know I always was very fond of you," replied Audrey; "and if you were to be really ill!"

"I am not ill!" cried Polly in great distress.

"Oh yes, you are; you flush so, and then turn so pale. Come and sit by the fire a while. I like having you with me."

Polly made some unintelligible answer, and ran out of Audrey's presence. And in her own room her state of mind was most pitiable. It was impossible to deceive any one who was so good to her. She could not carry out her intention and give the letter to Mr. Wentworth. She would be the very meanest wretch in all the world if she could betray Miss Wentworth by doing that. But every feeling of her nature revolted from the duty of posting it, and that, she knew, she ought to do. Polly that day was very near madness. She stayed alone in her room, sullenly refusing to go down or unlock her door.

More than once Bridget went to Audrey

about it. "It would be as fit if young madam, locked in her room upstairs, came down and helped a bit, and me cleaning the kitchen too."

But Audrey said Bridget was to leave her alone. Polly was ill and unhappy about quarrelling with her aunt, and she was fretting about that and about her own health.

"Well," said Bridget, dissatisfied enough, "she can fret a bit if you wish it, Miss Audra'; but surely by dinner-time she'll be done and ready to help me."

But Polly would neither speak nor eat, nor respond to encouraging messages sent by Audrey, nor yet to Audrey herself when she went to try her power over her; and night came, and she was still upstairs. Bridget saw that she was better, and had taken a cup of tea, for she did open the door at last, but still petitioned to be left alone.

"Leave her in peace," said George, when he heard of it; "it is wiser. She will sleep to-night and be better when she gets up; and if not, you must send for the doctor."

That day Dudley had sent back Brian's

letter apparently unopened, with a line to say that he did so by his sister's desire, and that she hoped and requested that Mr. Templemore would make no further attempt to see her. Dudley also did not like the crookedness of the path which he had taken. When he first began to intercept letters he had believed that the destruction of one would be all that was required of him. He hated what he had done and was doing, and it needed the sight of George and Audrey sitting side by side, happy, peaceful, and, as it seemed, absolutely free from all thought of care from without, to reconcile him to what he was doing.

“It would be madness to hesitate now,” thought he; “it would ruin her life if I did. If the thing were to do over again, nothing in all the world would induce me to begin it; but I must go through with it now. Place on one side her health, nay, her life, a good husband like George, and everything wealth can give; and on the other, a conceited, fickle fool like Templemore, overwhelmed with debts, and so extravagant that she never could

look for common comforts." He went and sat beside them, and tried to smother the sharp reproaches of his conscience and the disgust of self-contempt by the pleasure which he derived from hearing them forming what seemed to be very happy plans.

"In a year's time," he tried to think, "if I were to confess to that child what I had gone through for her sake, I honestly believe she would bless me for it; and she ought, for she will never know what it has cost me."

CHAPTER V.

“Oh, what a drear, dark close to my poor day!”

R. BROWNING.

GEORGE stayed with his cousins till ten o'clock. At that hour Audrey was ordered to go to bed, and he usually left. There was something about Dudley which George did not like, something that did not ring true; he could hardly define what it was, but it made him disinclined to sit and talk with him. But this night, and other nights, he did take a pleasure in walking up and down the path beside the poplars opposite, watching the light in Audrey's window.

He might have been there for half an hour, when the street door opened and shut noiselessly, and a dark figure stole out.

“Polly, by Jove!” thought he, faintly

tracing the outline of the girl's figure by the sparing light of the gas. "How dark it is! I must really see that we have fair play about the gas they supply us with. I wonder what that girl is after? There is something very far from right about her. I have been convinced of that all the week."

He would not have thought it particularly necessary to watch her if she had not taken the way which led only into some lonely fields by the river. She went into the first field, he did so too; she kept in the middle of the field, he stole along by the hedge; she walked up and down for some time, but it was too dark for her to see him. Then she turned away back towards the town, still keeping by the river-side. He followed her as closely as he could, but she walked with such wild speed that it was difficult to keep up with her. She hurried on till she came to a place where a foot-bridge crossed the river. She made her way to it, and began to cross it. George still followed, but at a little distance in the shade. Suddenly, without one moment's delay, she slipped through the railing in the

very middle of the bridge, and threw herself into the water, uttering a cry as she fell, which alarmed two or three men who were busy about their horses in a stable near.

“It’s a case!” cried one, running towards the spot from which the sound came. “I knew what had happened. My heart was in my mouth as soon as ever she set up that skrike” (shriek).

George was already in the water, and by the direction which he took they guessed the exact spot where she had disappeared. The bystanders, three in number, stood watching.

“It is a good plucked un, that is whe has gone in. Whe is’t?”

“Nay, how’s I to knaw?” said another. “He’ll get mair than a dooking if he doesn’t mind what he is about! Well, some folks is made ventursome and some isn’t.”

One of the strangest features of these men’s conduct was the contemplative calmness with which they were able to look on when life and death were thus at stake. So far as Polly was concerned, their indifference was perfect, but they were stirred up to some excitement

by the idea of a bystander having gone in "of his own accord."

"Why, look there! he has gone right into the middle of the river after her! Gocks! but she has had a mind to do it well this time!"

The darkness which made his search so difficult, the cold which almost paralyzed his limbs, all made George somewhat hopeless of success; but he laid hold of a long coil of hair which had unloosed itself from its fastenings in her fall, and thus he saved her. Clutching this, and keeping well out of reach of her grasp, George struck out for the bank, and even he, good swimmer as he was, felt that his life had had a struggle for it when he reached dry land and, by the help of the now active spectators, drew her in.

"What mun we do wi' her now we've got her? Whe does she belong to?"

"Set her down on t' bank a minute," said another.

"Ay, we will so; a good lie on t' bank is a'most more than she deserves, after what she has been after—it is so."

"Why, it is Mr. Copeland! I ax your

pardon, sir, but folks is bad to know in t' watter. Tak' a sup o' brandy, sir ? ”

George took some brandy, and poured some into Polly's mouth; then, quickly thinking that it would be a very bad thing for Audrey to know what Polly had done, he ordered the men to carry her to a refuge which he had founded. The matron there was a kind, sensible woman, who would do all that was necessary. Polly was still partly unconscious, but George had no fear of her not coming round. The men took her in their arms and carried her, George following.

When, by a river-side path, they came near Flower Gate, George rang the bell, saw Dudley, told him what had happened, and charged him and Bridget to keep all knowledge of it from Audrey. Dudley insisted on his changing his clothes, which he did with great rapidity, and then ran after the men.

When he got to the refuge, he found that Mrs. Fordham was doing all that was requisite for Polly; and after waiting some time, he was admitted to the room where she was lying wrapped in warm blankets, with all her hair

folded in flannel. She was now quite conscious, but the expression in her face was sullen, rebellious, and unforgiving.

“Here’s the kind gentleman who saved you, honey,” said Mrs. Fordham coaxingly, as she introduced George; “here he is. He has come to see how you are, but don’t put yourself about to speak to him; you can thank him to-morrow, dear.”

“Thank him, indeed!” said Polly fiercely. “He might have let me alone! I need not have gone into the water if I wanted him to get me out again. I don’t see that it is his business to settle that I am to live, whether I wish it or not!”

“Hush, Polly!” said George; “don’t talk now; wait till daylight comes, and you will then think very differently.”

He saw that she was in a state of painful excitement, and did not like the look of her great wide-open eyes.

“Oh, but if I think that, why should I not say it? If I consider that I have had enough life, who has anything to do with that but myself?”

“You had better go, sir,” said Mrs. Fordham; “it is just her head is rather touched—that’s it. She’ll come to to-morrow, I’ll be bound.” Then in the passage she said, “She has something she will hold tight in one of her hands. It is tied to a ribbon she wears round her neck. It is some gold thing, for I see it shining, but she won’t let me touch it.”

“Poor thing!” said George. “Don’t seem to notice it. Leave it quietly in her hand.”

“She is very well put on, sir; plain, but good.”

George hurried away with his mind very full.

“There is some very sad story behind all this,” thought he, “if we only knew. What selfish brutes men are. They go scot free, and poor girls like Polly—— Well, that poor girl was born for something better.”

Audrey had his first visit next day. The secret had been kept from her; they had told her that Polly was ill, and wished to go to a friend’s house for a while, and Audrey had thought her so very strange the day before, that she had no difficulty in believing it.

When George went to the refuge, there was Polly lying in bed, very warm, very weak, and on the whole shocked by what she had done.

“She will not try that again, sir,” said Mrs. Fordham. “There’s some on them, sir, that trying to drown themselves does as much for in the way of quieting them, sir, as if they really got it done. It seems to work off a great deal from them, and leaves them settled. She’ll fret a bit to herself, and carry on a bit with me, perhaps, but she’ll be ever so much the better after.”

George did not quite like the way his chief official talked, or her aptness to recognize attempted suicide as a lawful medicine; but he thought that there might be some truth in her words as regarded Polly, and when he saw the latter, he felt there was still more.

She did not speak much; her eyes dwelt for a moment on his face, and then they closed.

“You must keep her very quiet, Mrs. Fordham,” said he, “and warm.”

“Warm, sir!” cried Mrs. Fordham. “Just

look what a good fire I have, sir! Not that it was all for her, for I was forced to have a good one to dry off her clothes, poor thing. They were just a sop, but they'll air off in time."

"Yes, they ought to air here," said he, thinking it was a good thing that coals only cost three and sixpence a ton in that district, and that his pocket was a deep one.

He had taken this house five or six years ago, and used it ever since as a home for poor girls on their first leaving prison, or for servants who were too ill to work, or for any stragglers from the ranks of health, moral or physical, in whom he saw chances of amendment. The matron was a motherly north-country woman, the house comfortable and homely.

He looked round the room with some satisfaction; all was clean and well cared for. The fire itself was enough to put any one in good spirits, being something like a barrow-load of coals in a red glow of heat. By it was a clothes-horse with poor Polly's clothing, and on the bright fender was a plate with a little

store of trifles which Mrs. Fordham had taken from her wet pocket. She had emptied it the night before, and now had put the contents to dry. There was a thimble, a pair of scissors, some keys, and a letter. Mrs. Fordham saw he was looking in this direction, and said—

“I emptied her pockets, sir, soon after she came in; the things were in a fine sop, I can tell you. There’s a letter I think won’t do much more good to anybody, and it has not been through the post yet!”

Polly opened her eyes and looked up anxiously. George thought that she wanted to have it given to her, and rose to get it for her; but he started when he saw it, for in the blurred direction he recognized Audrey’s handwriting, saw a bit of Templemore’s name, and guessed that the letter contained the returned half of what the child insisted on calling her “indenture.” The ink had run and made violet blotches on the paper, the envelope was broken, and the stamp had strayed from its place.

“That is a letter written by Miss Wentworth, Polly! How does it come here?” and

to Polly's fancy Mr. Copeland's voice sounded rather severe.

"She gave it to me to post, and I never had time to take it; I was going with it, but got stopped," replied Polly faintly.

"That letter ought to have gone at once," said he; and then he thought with great vexation that now Audrey would have once more to go through all the pain of sending it off.

Why should he not try to spare her? She was his own, and he would not let her suffer if he could help it. One day only was lost, and if he sent that letter for her, and sent it to-day, it would reach Breamore just as quickly as if she herself despatched it. He took the letter, first stripping off the envelope, which was now useless. When the outside paper, which he did not remove or look at, was entirely dry, he asked Mrs. Fordham for an envelope. He was resolved that it should go as quickly as possible; to him all Audrey's wishes and fancies were sacred. It was necessary to re-direct it, but he did not like his handwriting to appear on the envelope containing the deeds of a broken contract of that

kind ; besides, had not his own Audrey said, "I wish to keep you and all connected with this entirely apart"? He would therefore keep himself as entirely apart as was consonant with the fulfilment of her desire that the letter should reach Brian. But it required re-directing, and Mrs. Fordham's writing was not sufficiently legible for him to feel justified in asking her help on an occasion like this.

"Are you well enough to direct this?" he asked Polly, and he looked steadily at her while waiting for her answer.

"Yes, Mr. Copeland," said Polly meekly. "If you wish it, no doubt I can do it, though I had rather some one else—but it is no matter." And she sat up in bed, and in her own by no means inelegant handwriting wrote the name of Brian Templemore. When it was done, George took the letter.

"What are you going to do with it?" she inquired anxiously.

"See that it goes, to be sure. Miss Wentworth gave it to you to post, and you say you were not able to take it, but at any rate we must lose no more time now."

“I will take it to the post myself this afternoon,” cried Polly; “I shall be quite well enough to go out by that time.”

“No, thank you,” replied George; “it is better for me to do it myself.”

He got up to go as he spoke, and his voice seemed so severe to Polly that she shrank from him and partly hid her face. But George was not feeling severe at all, but very sorry for her. “Talk to her,” said he to Mrs. Fordham when he went, “but be kind to her and don’t let her get up.”

“I shall come to see you again very soon,” said he, returning one moment to say this to Polly; and then he hurried away, having made Mrs. Fordham promise to utter no reproaches for her attempt on her life. He meant to talk to her himself when she was well again. He took the indenture, now newly clothed in another envelope, he dropped it in the letter-box, and heard it rattle down into its depths, and then he went to his work. Twice or thrice during the day he found himself considering whether he ought not, as a matter of course, to tell Audrey what had

happened to her letter; but he wished to spare her as much as possible, and when he remembered that he could not tell her about that without at the same time letting her know about Polly's attempt to drown herself, he was sure it was better to say nothing at all.

CHAPTER VI.

“The sun posts westward, passed is thy morn,
And twice it is not given thee to be born.”

DRUMMOND.

WHEN Brian Templemore opened Dudley's note and found his own letter to Audrey returned, with the fastening apparently unbroken, and read the short decisive message which Dudley pretended to have authority to deliver, he knew that he had lost Audrey for ever, and lost her too by his own fault. He tried to bear this by seeking distractions of all kinds, and plunging into such amusements as were open to him; but though, on these occasions, thought might be silenced, it was but for a time, and it took its opportunity and came upon him afterwards like to an armed man. His father had let him fill the house

with officer friends without repining, ever since he first saw that the boy was in trouble, and he bore his absences and tried not to be anxious when he knew that his wish for excitement was leading him into dangers of all kinds, and, for his own part, never uttered one reproach, or hinted that Brian had played away the happiness of his life by his fickleness and delay. The happiness of the squire's life was for the present gone also, for not only had he lost the daughter-in-law of his choice, but he saw little of his son.

The latter had been paying a short visit in the south of the county to Colonel Trevor's father—a dissipated scapegrace of a man, who kept open house, a good cellar, and a stable full of horses; but there was an aroma of gambling about the establishment which made old Mr. Templemore very uneasy when Brian announced his intention of going there. That was the very day after Dudley's note reached him. He went, and came home on a dull November afternoon with a bad cold, a severe headache, and a temper which required management.

“Where’s the governor?” said he to Lottie.

“Gone out in the carriage.”

“Who goes out in carriages on such beastly days as this? Where’s mother?”

“Gone with him. Why, Brian, you know mother—she never lets father go alone.”

“Nay, on a day like this, she might perhaps have liked staying at home better.”

“Brian!” said Lottie, “do you really think mother would leave poor father all alone, for the sake of doing what she liked best?”

“I suppose you mean that for me,” said he gruffly, with an indignant look at Lottie. But when he saw how very far he had to look down before he could bring her head within range of his angry glances, he remembered what a child she was, and that the art of talking at people was at that tender age unknown. He was fond of the child at any time, and now he did not want to be left alone, so he unbent his rugged brow and condescended to order her about.

“Put some coals on the fire, Lottie. Don’t spill them on the hearth—that looks so uncomfortable—but scatter them about on the

top of the fire—that makes it bright—and I will lie down on the sofa, and you will run and bring me my slippers and——Stop! tell James I want some brandy and soda; tell him as you go, and then he won't keep me waiting so long."

Lottie did all this, the fire burnt up, and then he politely asked her what news there was. There was no news; everything was just the same as when he left.

Brian said he hated houses where everything was always just the same; he liked nice things to happen.

Lottie explained that they had had mincepies that day to the early dinner. The cook had just been making mince-meat, and they had had some pies to try it. But that did not seem enough to cheer Brian.

"Has any one been here?"

"Mr. Davison was here two days ago."

"Oh, never mind him! Are there no letters?"

"Yes, lots on the dining-room mantelpiece. They have been coming ever since you went away."

“Why did no one send them on?”

“Oh, I think they are only shop letters, for papa said it was no use sending letters like those to a man who had gone away for pleasure, and that they would only vex you. What do you think I said, Brian, when they said that?”

“What?” he inquired politely, though inwardly much bored.

“I told mother that she and father had better open the bills when you were away and pay them, and let you open the receipts when you came home. That would not vex you, I said; and wasn’t it true? Wouldn’t you have liked that, Mr. Brian?”

Brian was divided between an inclination to smile at the child’s ready wit, and annoyance at her preternatural sharpness in this untoward direction. He did not speak; so she continued—

“I don’t think papa and mamma could really do that, Brian, for I fancy that they have not very much money for themselves just now! You perhaps think they always say that, but I really do believe it has been true lately.”

"Oh, do be quiet, Lottie!" cried Brian. "I am so sick of hearing such things; you ought not to know anything about them."

"Don't be vexed, Brian," said Lottie encouragingly, "I am quite sure they are not all shop letters; there are some real ones amongst them, I know, by the look of them, and very likely they are nice ones."

"Nobody writes me nice ones now," said he bitterly.

"Poor old Brian! But there might be some amongst these; let me go and bring them."

"No, no."

"Oh, let me!" entreated Lottie, half gone already.

"Well, please yourself," said Brian crossly, for bringing the letters might be a pleasure to her, but was not likely to be so to him.

She soon came back with a pinafore full, and seated herself on a straight-backed tall chair, with her feet on a high footstool. She kept very quiet now in all ways, for she was afraid of his telling her to give him the letters, and dearly she loved manipulating them, and

the sense of power which possession of them gave her. She need not have been afraid. Brian had no desire whatever to see them; indeed, he was much more inclined to say, "Hang the letters!" than anything else.

But all this was pure pleasure to Lottie. "We will take them one by one," said she, "and I will give you an accurate description of the outside of each, so that we need not waste time on those we don't care about."

Lottie was always extremely sensitive about any loss of her time. Brian was resigned, for now he was warm and comfortable, and while he was lying down his head was better; besides, he did not want to be left alone. So he let her do as she liked, only answering her questions when it suited him.

"Are you ready, Brian?" asked she. "Well, here is a thing, and a very pretty thing; now, what will you give me for this pretty thing?" and she waved a letter backwards and forwards before his eyes. "It comes from London, and the envelope is made of good thick paper, and it has F. and M. for a monogram?"

“Nothing!” said Brian decidedly. “Put it on that table; it will keep a little longer.”

“Well then, this? This must be from a young lady, it is so neat. Oh no! I see it is one of the sort you don’t like; I’ll put it on the table with the other. But here is one, and the writing is middling good, and there is Dorminster for a post-mark?”

“Toss it here,” said Brian, and when he got it he saw that it was Polly’s writing. “Botheration!” said he, but he opened it.

A sheet of white paper was inside which looked crinkled and tumbled, and as if it had seen service, and inside that again was something that looked very like the indenture. He unfolded it with a quickening of his pulses, for Polly was in Audrey’s house, and Audrey might have given her her own indenture to enclose and return to him, for nothing seems improbable to lovers; but no, it was his half. There was his name, Brian William Templemore, and this was the very paper which had been so long kept in the locket which Polly had insisted on making him give her. Why had she sent it back now? Why, when she

had kept it so long, had she not kept it altogether, or put it quietly in the fire? What matter what became of it now! He looked carefully at the indenture, then at the paper and the envelope, and then he got up slowly and burnt them, for he never wished to see that paper or be reminded of that day again. He certainly would never see that paper more. There it lay, black, shrivelled, and ready to be the spoil of the first breath of air. And no more would come of that day and the pretty compact of the indenture from which he had hoped so much. He little dreamed how he was suffering now for his own misdoing—little knew that Polly, of whose feelings he had been so selfishly careless, was the agent of his punishment, and that by changing the papers in her misery, misery caused by him, she had lost him the chance of knowing the truth about Audrey before it was too late. If, even, as had been originally the case, the letter had come addressed in Audrey's own handwriting, he would, though puzzled, have sought an explanation; but no explanation was needed now. Polly had sent him back

the paper which she had carried away in the locket; it had no value or use to her, and now, alas! none to him.

“What will you give me for this pretty little thing?” began Lottie, in a chirping, gay little voice, though his heart was aching so. “I must not call it a too pretty thing, for the envelope has such a black, black edge; but, Brian, what will you give for it? Say something, and don’t think about the blackness of it.”

“Oh, darling, be quiet!” said Brian. “Read no more. Your letters make me very sad and miserable.”

“Just this one,” said Lottie, loth to come down to common earth. “It came yesterday morning, and papa said you ought to have it at once, and was cross about mamma not sending it on to you; but she said you were sure to come home to-day. He saw the name on the seal, and said it was a lawyer’s letter, and very likely about something very important! Oh, Brian, is there any chance of its being to put you in prison?”

“Prison! Nonsense. Of course not! Toss

it here, child ; and, mind, it is the last I mean to open just now."

Lottie threw it across to him, and he read it with many changes of countenance and much surprise. He turned it round and round, and read it again and again, before he exclaimed—

"My goodness, Lottie ! but you have given me a tremendous letter this time. What do you think it is about ? I can hardly believe it is true. I am afraid there must be some mistake, and yet it is the lawyer's own letter ! Why, Lottie, old Mrs. Maitland is dead, and has left me seven hundred a year. Seven hundred a year ! Poor old woman, and I don't deserve a penny from her !"

Lottie took the news with perfect composure ; the words seven hundred a year represented nothing to her. She thought every one got as much money as they wanted from their fathers and mothers ; not on the days when the said fathers and mothers were cross with them for spending too much, perhaps, but as soon as they forgot about it—in a day or two, as a matter of course.

"Then I may open the bills—I may take the letters as they come now? You don't mind about getting bills if you are rich."

"Oh no; give me no bills, and no more letters either."

"But, Brian, here is one with the post-mark Twisleton; that is where old Mrs. Maitland lived. Perhaps some more of them are dead, and have left you ever so much more money."

"Lottie, don't talk in that way; that poor woman was very kind to think of me, and she is dead, and we must speak respectfully of her."

"Well, read that letter," said Lottie, not relishing her scolding.

It was from a companion of Mrs. Maitland's, who said that before that poor lady died she had made her promise to write this letter to Mr. Brian Templemore, to tell him that she had "left all she had to him, her dear young cousin and godson, because her other relations were well off, and he had always shown a kind remembrance of her."

Brian stopped in amazement. What remem-

brance had he shown? He could not call to mind one decently civil action towards her on his part. He had not seen this cousin now for years and years. He had been with her for a week or two when he was a boy of fourteen, and then he had harassed her with continual anxiety lest he should break his neck out riding, or shoot himself, or come to some other bad end, and had only laughed at her apprehensions. Ever since that time he had neither seen nor heard of her. Yes! he had written to her from the Cape, when he was staying with the Armitages. Audrey had asked him if there were no other letters which he would like her to write for him, and he had thought of this cousin, and pretended to be glad of the opportunity of getting a letter written to her, just for the sake of keeping Audrey half an hour longer with him. Could that letter have done it?

He continued to read the companion's letter: "The dear deceased had been so inexpressibly touched by the affection Mr. Templemore had shown by writing to her from the Cape, when he was so ill, and had so

recently escaped shipwreck, that she always said she would make an especial point of remembering his consideration and attention, and the companion believed that if she had not made the will at that very time, she had, at any rate, then made up her mind to leave all she possessed to him; for ever afterwards she was never weary of talking of the dear boy's good, affectionate heart, and how much she valued a long memory for past kindness like his. All this was so many coals of fire on Brian's head. If he got that money, he would always feel that he had no right to it. It was all Audrey's doing, and for her sake, and he was an impostor.

But, after all, if even he wrote to say that he had not a good, kind, affectionate heart, or a long memory, and therefore could not honestly take that money, it would only go to some other cousins, who, though they had perhaps done more work to get it, by paying Mrs. Maitland laborious attention, could not be said to deserve it, for they had mocked at her constantly in private. Brian began to think that perhaps one little act of involuntary

respect deserved as much reward and recognition as a lifelong system of hypocrisy.

The excitement of this surprise, and the sudden rush of memory, began to make him feel much more ill. "Give me a kiss, my Lottie," said he, "and run away; we will look at the other letters by-and-by."

"I should have liked to open a few more of them," said she regretfully; "but I suppose you want to think about what you have heard. Will all that money make you very happy, Brian?"

Ah no! that was the worst of it. It would not: it had come too late! If he had got it a year ago, or if he had but been true to Audrey! All good things in life come too late for the full enjoyment of them, or when the strong desire for them has passed away. Now, the possession of this money was coupled with such bitter regrets that he would never care for it at all. He could not but picture the arrival of this letter under very different circumstances—circumstances which might have been—when the news it brought would have filled up the measure of his perfect

happiness.—If he had but dared to make the venture,—if he had married Audrey and had lived with her in the poverty which he so much dreaded then, but which he now felt could never have hurt one who had the daily comfort of her presence, that letter would have come all the same, and have brought the extreme of happiness with it, instead of the extreme of despair. He had been very unhappy about her before, but what he felt before was nothing to this.

“Lottie, darling,” said he, “go away; I want to be alone.”

Lottie had been for some time watching him with surprise. Now she exclaimed, “Brian, you are crying—you really are! I see a shining in your eyes. I thought grown-up men never did that.”

“Crying!” said Brian indignantly. “Nonsense, Lottie! How can you be such a goose? Crying! I am only thinking.”

CHAPTER VII.

“Now join your hands, and with your hands your hearts.”

KING HENRY VI.

“There’s no trust,

No faith, no honesty in men ; all perjured,

All forsworn, all naught, all dissemblers.”

ROMEO AND JULIET.

THE 18th of December was Audrey Wentworth’s wedding-day, and the ceremony was over. The Wentworths and Copelands met at the church, but there was no one else except Mr. Lauriston, and this party accompanied the bride and bridegroom back to Flower Gate, to breakfast with them, and see them go.

As they entered the house, they observed a change in its appearance. Pots of beautiful hothouse plants stood in the hall, and made it bright and gay ; others were seen in the distance enlivening the staircase windows ;

and while Audrey was looking with some surprise at these unexpected decorations, Bridget came forward with a bouquet of white camellias, which she put into her mistress' hand, saying—

“They are a present to you from Mr. Templemore, Miss Audra’—Mrs. George, I mean. You’ll please not be hard upon me at first, Miss Audra’, about calling you Mrs. George, for, you see, it comes very strange to me. Just as you had got away to t’ church, up drives his man with all these flowers and things, and sore put about he was at getting here behind his time; and there was a note from Mr. Templemore and all. Dear me! what have I done with it?” And she began to rummage, as she called it, in her pocket.

“Never mind the note, Bridget, now. Let us get upstairs. Don’t you see that you are keeping every one standing?” Dudley said this very impatiently, and tried to communicate a desire for moving on to all around by pushing forward; but Bridget said—

“Oh, but she is like to have her letter!” and produced it.

It was supposed by all to be from Brian. Audrey glanced at George, smiled in his face at his anxious expression—for he was sorry she should be troubled thus on that day—and then quietly put the letter in her pocket unopened. Dudley, meantime, had cast a look of inquiry and annoyance on Polly, who had come by special invitation from Audrey, to help to wait. Polly's answering look told what was the truth—that she had never thought of the danger of more letters coming; that Bridget had been too quick for her, even had she remembered it.

But no harm seemed likely to come of the note. The whole party went quietly upstairs together, and there, in the drawing-room, were more flowers from Breamore; and everybody crowded round Audrey and George with smiles and congratulations.

After a while Mr.* Copeland drew Audrey aside to the window, and said—

“My darling, this is, perhaps, as happy a day as I have ever known. My boy has loved you ever since he first saw you, but I was afraid at one time you were not going to fancy

him. Thank God! you have disappointed me. You have taken to him of your own accord too. There was something which might have influenced you, for you are a very good sister, but Dudley tells me that he has never informed you of it, so as to leave you completely free to accept or refuse George, according to your own feelings, and I am heartily thankful that he decided on that course."

"I don't know what you mean, uncle," said Audrey with inward trepidation.

"I know you don't, my pet. That says such a great deal for Dudley! I know he never let you know that months ago I went and talked to him, for I knew that, like all good girls, you were much led by your brother, and I said that if he would only use his influence to make you accept my boy George, I would, on your wedding-day, alter my will and leave all I have between you two children and my own two. Well, you have seen for yourself what a fine fellow George is, without any influence being wanted, and now you shall have the comfort of thinking you have been the means of securing a nice fortune to Dudley. For I

have done what I said I would ; I have altered my will as I promised this very morning, and when my time comes to die, he, like the rest of you, will have his portion."

Audrey looked stupefied.

"You need not be borne down by the weight of your own wealth, my dear Audrey," said Mr. Copeland kindly, "for what you have will be in George's power, and you will still have to go to him when you want an odd ten-pound note or so for any little fancy ; that is the way with wives' money. But there is no fear of George not being liberal."

"I am not thinking of that," said Audrey.

And she was not ; her uncle's words brought an uncomfortable, a wretchedly uncomfortable, thought of suspicion to her mind. For Dudley had so-urged her to marry George—over and over again he had done this with such persistence, that she had wondered at it ; for she had thought it strange that he, with his pride, was able to overlook the fact of George's calling. She hoped he had not done so because of that money ! Her eyes sought Dudley's uneasily. He was watching her with equal

uneasiness. He did not like to see his uncle talking so earnestly to her. Surely that benevolent, but not very prudent, old gentleman was not telling that child about his will?

But Dudley was not very prudent himself, or how could he have failed to remember that few people make lavish presents of large sums of money without wishing to get some credit, and see some wonder, admiration, and gratitude for their generosity? Of course Mr. Copeland meant to have the pleasure of telling Audrey! Audrey observed Dudley's guilty-looking eyes, and then thought of George. She turned to look at him. She watched him for a moment with this suspicion—not more than a moment—and then her look changed to one of affection. Dear fellow! His face was happy and handsome, his expression straightforward, and his eyes clear of all hidden thoughts.

Old Mr. Copeland was remarking how completely his great piece of news had failed to produce any effect, from the simple fact of its being told on the wedding-day.

“Now, that is all I have to say,” said he, for

he had noticed the look she had given George. "I am keeping you away from the others, Audrey, but I thought when the time came for going away, you would part from Dudley more happily if you knew that you had been the means of giving him all that he has been longing for so long. I am afraid he has had a miserable time of it since he came amongst us, but he will get his dear Minsteracres back some of these days easily enough now."

"Will he, really?" said Audrey, making an effort to speak.

"Yes, easily enough. Don't mention what I have said to any one—I have not even told my wife yet, but I thought I must tell you!"

Audrey tried to say something grateful—but what did this mean? Not even his wife! And yet Dudley knew, and Dudley had known it for months! Oh, how sad and strange she felt, and how she wished that she too had been left in ignorance. She wondered if George knew. Perhaps she might have asked her uncle that question, but Dudley, growing alarmed at the change in her appearance, came to the window and said—

“Audrey, my child, what are you and my uncle plotting about?”

“Plotting, Dudley! I don’t think that I plot much,” she answered in a grave, sad voice, and a tear rose to her eyes—the word had such new, such painful associations for her.

Tears on her wedding-day! She drove them away by a strong effort, but she longed to escape from sight for a while, and said—

“Bridget and Polly are forgetting all about the breakfast; I must run to see what is the matter.”

“You run!” exclaimed everybody. “You are the company to-day!”

So Dudley went instead.

All below looked perfectly ready. In the middle of the table stood a very large, handsome plant covered with crimson flowers, and this also was sent by Mr. Templemore. Dudley would have liked nothing better than to break it into small fragments.

“Mary!” cried he vehemently, “where are you, I say?”

Polly came—a much more meek and down-cast Polly than he had ever seen before.

“Why did you take those flowers in?” said he in a low voice, “and why did you let Bridget get hold of that letter?”

“Sir, I forgot about minding the door, and all the rest, and Bridget was dressed to-day and went; and she was so set up about the flowers coming that she would have them all displayed, and I could not get the note from her either—but it is from the squire.”

“Oh, only from the squire,” thought Dudley with much satisfaction. “Well, it is done now, and can’t be helped. I suppose he has sent her his good wishes—that is all.”

The breakfast was dull. It was too exclusively composed of members of the family to be otherwise. Mr. Lauriston sat and blinked with delight, for he could not but think that the next occasion of the same kind which would summon the family together would most probably be his own wedding; and when any of the party put the thought into words, he blinked and raised a happy eye to his bright Osmunda, and blinked again.

Audrey was almost painfully silent and quiet. George longed to get his poor darling

away from them, to let her overcome in peace the feelings which were distressing her. She, no doubt, was thinking of the parting from Dudley, and of the solemnity of the vows which she had taken upon herself, but, please God, he would make it easy to her to do all that she had promised. Dudley was very nervous. He took glass after glass of champagne, and assumed a gaiety which was unnatural. No one was really at ease but old Mr. Copeland, who was radiant with satisfaction at seeing every wish of his heart thus fulfilled.

In due time Audrey went to change her dress. On her bed lay a warm, dark-grey travelling dress, her bonnet and muff; on the floor were her boxes locked, strapped, and ready to go. All was ready. She was about to begin new life in new places, and how trustfully could she have gone if only this had not happened. Had Dudley bartered her, his sister, against that large sum of money and Minsteracres? She felt a mean creature to admit such a suspicion to her mind; but what a mean creature he was if he had done it, and he must have done it, for step by step he

had led her on to promise to marry George. She saw it all now. Persuasion and entreaty, pressure of all kinds, had been brought to bear upon her. And why did he look so restless, so uncomfortably conscious, when his uncle was talking to her, if he were not afraid of her learning the true reason for what he had done? She had often heard him laugh at his uncle's foolish way of speaking openly of things about which a more sensible man would keep silence, and no doubt this was one of them. It had not been intended that she should hear of this sale which he had effected for some time to come. Her heart rose up in bitterness against Dudley. The brother whom she had worshipped all her life had done this! She had loved him, and the only proof which he had given of his thinking much of her was that he had sold her for such a high sum. She smiled bitterly as this conceit flashed across her mind. He valued her at eighty thousand pounds.

She walked distractedly up and down the room as she dwelt thus on what she had learnt. Then came the thought, "Could

George have been a party to this bargain?" If he had, it would be impossible for her to love or respect him. But that he could not have been! Yet Dudley had been so. Would she not have looked upon that as still more out of the question yesterday? Every one had been false to her all through her life. Brian had deceived her, deceived her cruelly; and not content with that, had sent flowers to celebrate the joyful occasion of losing her for ever. The recollection of the flowers brought the letter to her mind. Was it from Brian or from his father, and what could either of them have to say to her? With much repugnance, she opened the envelope, for now she disliked touching even a bit of paper which Brian had touched.

It was from the squire, and she read it carefully.

"MY DEAR YOUNG LADY,

"We did not know that you were going to be married until a week ago, when my doctor (who is, I believe, yours also) told us the fact, the name of your future husband,

and the day. Let a poor old man who had other hopes for you offer his fervent wishes for your happiness, and send you some of his pet flowers. You would not come to Breamore to choose some for yourself when we begged you to do so, but in return for your pretty *Disa*, let me offer you these now. I hope they will show you we are feeling no ill-will, though, my dear young lady, I confess I was just a little hurt when you denied us admittance to your house. I am, however, anxious not to cloud your wedding-day by any complaints, and, alas! I can readily understand that you might think it well to decline all communication with myself and family as you did. Still, though it may be weakness, I have such a horror of letting bitterness endure, that I beg you to believe that you have my prayers for your complete happiness and restoration to health; and, as a sign of belief and good-will, I should like you to wear my flowers. My son desires his remembrances to you, and joins in all good wishes. Twelve p.m. to-morrow (the day of your marriage) will see him begin his journey southward, and next day he will go

further still, until at last he gets to the shores of the Mediterranean ; and there, under bluer skies and brighter sunshine, I hope he will grow strong again, and come home and leave me no more.

“Yours very truly,

“BERNARD TEMPLEMORE.”

As Audrey finished reading this the door opened, and Polly looked in with a downcast nervous face and manner.

“Miss Audrey, the carriage has come, and Mr. Wentworth sent me to see if you had got your dress changed, and if I could help you in any way.”

“Dress changed ! Carriage come !” thought Audrey, as if neither of these things had anything to do with her. “Polly, come in here, and shut the door. Now, I want you to tell me if either Mr. Templemore or his son ever called at this house since you came to stay here ?”

Polly looked up and down ; her change of colour spoke, her voice was silent.

“I insist on an answer, Polly,” said Audrey decidedly.

“They came when you were ill,” said Polly at last, very reluctantly.

“And you did not tell me of their visit?”

“I—I must have forgot.”

“Did they only come once?”

“No; they came twice.”

“And you sent them away, and never told me that they had been here?”

Polly shrank before Audrey’s intense gaze and the earnestness of her manner.

“Polly, I am speaking for the sake of knowing the truth. I will have a true answer. Why did you do that?”

“Miss, don’t look like that at me—I had my orders.”

“Who gave you your orders?”

Polly shook her head.

“Tell me at once. It is quite impossible for you to deceive me further. I never thought you would deceive me at all;” and as Audrey said this, the thought of her betrayal wrung from her a little gasp of misery. But she crushed it back—she was the stern judge now.

Polly began to shed tears and utter protestations of affection.

Audrey waved her hand contemptuously. "Not a word of that kind, please! '*You love me!*' Don't dare to say such a thing. Tell me at once who ordered you to refuse admission to the gentlemen we are speaking of? Was it Mr. Wentworth?"

Polly's head drooped lower and lower in token of acquiescence.

"And what other orders did he give you?"

"He ordered me to take him any letters either of them wrote to you."

"And did they write any?"

"Yes."

"And you took them to him?"

"No; he got them out of the box himself."

"And forbade you to let me know that they had come?"

"Yes."

"And that letter I gave you to post? You remember, it was one morning about a month ago, and it was addressed to Mr. Brian Templemore, Breamore Court; and I told you particularly to post it yourself, and you said that you had done so. What did you do with that letter? Did you give that to Mr. Wentworth also?"

“No ; Mr. George got that one from me—he took that.”

So it was complete ! Up to that time she had felt it impossible to doubt George, except for a moment, her faith in his honour and truth was so great. Now she knew that, one and all, they had been banded together to steal her letters, cheat her into false beliefs, rob her of the lover who was true to her, and give her one who plotted with servants and stole letters. She felt almost suffocated with grief and pain, and could not bear that that wretched creature, Polly, should stand there and see her sufferings.

“You can go away,” said she. “I know all now, and you need not stay. Polly, I loved you, and you have done this to me ! Don’t speak—go away. You have obeyed your orders, and you have made me the most miserable woman living. It is of no use crying, your tears have no value or meaning. Go out of this house at once, and never speak to me again. Go, I say—go this moment !”

Polly for one minute had a wish to throw herself at Audrey’s feet and beg her forgive-

ness; but Audrey's face was hard in its misery, unpitying in its contempt, and she crept away the picture of mean shame.

"Ah! but she does not know," thought Polly, "that I tried to drown myself; and she cannot tell how sorry I am that I did not get it done."

George, too, was false! She was sold for money; betrayed by those who seemed to love her; made to think the true false, and the false true. How was she ever to bear the sight of those two cruel men, Dudley and George? That was why they had kept her shut her up in one room; that was why they had given her Polly to wait on her. She hated and despised them both; and she was the wife of the one, and the sister of the other!

George had taken that letter! Yes, George had known all about her sending it. She had told him herself, and even when she told him, he had wanted to get possession of it; he had asked her then if he should not post it for her. It had seemed so kind and so natural that he should make that offer then. What a credulous, stupid fool of a girl she had been!

Up came Bridget. "Lawk, Miss Audra', the horses is getting that impatient! Don't you hear them stamping? Poor dumb creatures, I do. Why, my dear lamb, what a look you have! Has Polly been setting up any of her impidence to you? She came downstairs crying, and I was hoping you had been giving her a good setting-down."

Bridget detested Polly, principally because she was very pretty and above her work. She looked at Audrey to hear some confirmation of her hopes, but Audrey could not speak. There was a big, hard lump in her throat, and words would have been impossible to her at that moment.

"She is fretting about getting married and going away and leaving us all?" thought Bridget. "Dear me! she is, however. I wish some one would try if I would fret about such a thing. I don't believe it is in me to do it—I don't indeed. Come, dear love, come; you will have to set off in half an hour, for the train goes at two. Get your wedding dress off."

Yes, get it off! That was a good idea.

“Help me off with it,” said Audrey eagerly.
“Bridget, help me to get it off.”

The very sight of it and of her ornaments was revolting to her. The dress fell to the ground in a white ring round her feet, and Audrey would not let it be taken up. Bridget gave her her grey homespun, and she began to put it on in tremulous haste. Bridget saw her nervous unhappy face, but she also saw the beautiful white silk dress lying on the floor in such jeopardy, and her sympathies were given to the worthier of the two objects.

“Your dress! Oh, my honey, let me pick it up! That good dress on the floor, and you with your feet on it very likely, and cramping it up that bad that it will never go on again to look well. What! you won’t let me lift it from under you? Nay, my honey bairn; if that’s the way you are going on with your clothes, it’s a good thing you have married a draper.” And then she looked up in a fright at Audrey to see if she had taken offence. She was shocked at her own words; they had escaped quite by accident.

But Audrey had taken no offence and showed

no anger. All she said was, "Bridget, don't say that I am married, for I am not."

At this moment Dudley came to the door. "Won't you come down, Audrey darling? You seem so long away from us, and time is getting so short now. Are you nearly ready?"

"Nearly," said she in a cold firm voice. "Don't wait for me; say I am coming down."

"Don't you wait either, Bridget," said she, when Dudley was gone. "I have two or three little things to do, and then I will come."

"And so have I, and Polly is never any use at the best of time."

"Hush!" said Audrey. "Please leave me."

CHAPTER VIII.

"*Bra.* It is too true an evil: gone she is."

OTHELLO.

"Her wise

And lulling words are yet about the room,
Her presence wholly poured upon the gloom,
Down even to her vesture's creeping stir."

SORDELLO.

"It is half-past one," said Mr. William Copeland, "and you ought to start in ten minutes, George."

Mr. Copeland had been uneasily fingering a very ponderous gold watch for a long time.

"All right, father. We will give Audrey as long as we can, but I will see that we go punctually."

"I wanted to say so many things to her, and to wish her so many good wishes," murmured Mrs. Copeland in a very repining voice, "and here she has been upstairs for

quite three-quarters of an hour. Well, all I need say, perhaps, is that I hope and trust that her married life will be as happy as mine has been."

Dudley did not think much of the wish; to his mind his aunt and her life were both singularly colourless, and he hoped that something a little better was in store for Audrey. He was very far from being at his ease, and wandered about the room. And so some minutes passed, no one speaking unless it was to make some reference to the time or the weather. There had been a very heavy shower shortly before, but now the rain was nearly over, and the sun was bursting out in splendour behind a rolling mass of cumulus clouds.

"Ah!" said old Mr. Copeland, with a look of relief, "I am glad there is some sunshine for her to go away in; that rain was so dismal. And it is not lucky, either. You know the proverb—

'Blessed is the bride the sun shines on,
And blessed is the corpse the rain rains on.'

"William dear, do be quiet!" exclaimed

Mrs. Copeland in nervous fear. "How can you talk about such shocking things on a wedding-day? You are enough to bring down bad luck on the children."

"They are going to bring down the bad luck of losing the train on themselves," replied Mr. Copeland sharply. "George—do you hear?—it wants twenty minutes to two by my watch, and very likely the boxes are to bring down yet."

"Twenty-three minutes, father, precisely; and we don't really want more than ten minutes to go to the station, though it is better to have ten more to spare."

"I say it wants twenty—indeed, less by this time, and I say the boxes ought to be brought down and put on the carriage. Osmunda, you go and hurry Audrey. I should have thought you might have been useful to your cousin before."

Osmunda had been to offer her services twice already, and told her father so, and that Audrey had begged her to leave her, but that the last time she went Audrey was quite ready to go.

“Then she had better come,” said Dudley ; and he went upstairs at once to bring her, for delay was becoming impossible now.

He knocked at the door, but there was no answer ; he called Audrey, but still there was silence. He went in. In the middle of the floor was a lustrous white ring formed by Audrey’s pretty wedding dress. There was a little confusion of articles of dress dropped down here and there in haste, but there was no Audrey. “She is in some of the other rooms,” thought he ; and without loss of time he looked into them, one after the other, but he found her in none. “I dare say,” thought he, as he shut the last door, “the poor little thing has run down into the kitchen to give some farewell presents to the servants, but she ought to come now—it really is getting dangerously late.”

He went quickly to the kitchen. No one was there but Bridget in a tumult of occupation. For a moment he was so chilled by a terrible fear which came suddenly upon him that he could not speak, and when he did speak, what he said was not directly to the point.

“Are you quite alone, Bridget?”

There was much concern in his voice, but she observed it without understanding it otherwise than as an expression of pity for herself.

“’Deed, and that I am,” said she. “That nasty little Polly has gone away, sir! Fancy leaving me on a day like this to fight on as well as I can! It is just like her!”

Polly gone! Dudley’s perplexity and alarm increased.

“But your mistress, Bridget?”

“Ay, perhaps it was her that set her off—and another day I would have been glad, for I wanted none of her back. Well, she went off crying.”

“Crying!” said Dudley, becoming more and more miserably anxious. “Bridget! where is my sister? I thought she was here. She is gone! I can’t get you to understand. She is not in the house, I tell you!”

Bridget understood at once, and came to him. “Not here? Gone! She made me shut the door and leave her alone, and I did leave her. You see, I was forced to do that

when she gave me my orders. Honey Mr. Dudley, don't look like that!"

Dudley hurried away, and she followed him. On the stairs he met George and Mr. Lauriston, who, unsuspecting of misfortune, were acting under Osmunda's direction and bringing the boxes down. Dudley's face told them that something very bad had happened. Together they searched the house from the top to the bottom. No Audrey was to be found. She had disappeared without leaving the slightest trace. The coachman was at the front door, and was certain she had not gone out that way. No sound, no sight, had occurred to offer a clue. Only Bridget said she remembered the back door into the garden shutting with a "great clash" soon after she had left Miss Audrey's room; but a man working in a garden at the back said he had not seen any one passing. Some one might have passed that way, but he hardly believed it. The dismay of all the family was unbounded, and their fears glanced at dangers they dared not speak of. The first thought was that Polly had been instrumental in her

flight. George and Dudley got into the forlorn wedding carriage and drove to the refuge. Polly had been there, but had gone out again; and, though they made many inquiries, they could not hear where she was likely to be.

All that day was spent in anxious search for Audrey. It was a miserable day for all. Shreds of concealment had to be torn away from what had happened, and things had to be done which it wrung their hearts and souls to order, or even to acquiesce in. Bodies of men searched the woods and fields; the police were prompt and indefatigable; but still no trace was found. Her family had little hope of learning anything good, for her flight was so manifestly unpremeditated, that she could have formed no plan for it. She had little money, no friends to help her, no habit of acting for herself, no knowledge how to do so. What they feared and believed was that some secret misery had overpowered her, and that she had sought the quiet forgetfulness of death.

After hours of ineffectual effort to discover

the truth, George and Dudley sat together at night in the drawing-room in Flower Gate, going once more over every sickening possibility; recapitulating everything which had been done, struggling to remember anything which could have been left undone. There had not as yet been much talk between them of what her motive could have been. George thought too much pressure had been put on her. They had made her promise to do what as yet her strength was unequal to, and she ought to have been allowed more time to forget Brian Templemore. His note of the morning must have awakened all her old feeling for him, and she had fled away in her misery. George was wretched enough with this conviction; but Dudley had the secret knowledge of his own treachery besides. Polly had no doubt betrayed him to her at the last. Very likely, because as yet he had given her no reward for her help. What a punishment it would have been to Polly to know that he thought her capable of taking any reward for what she had done! But he was unaware of her fine feelings. To him it

seemed that a girl who had betrayed one person might well betray another; and Polly, no doubt, had brought this on them—Polly and that letter.

“George,” said he, “I think that letter from Templemore had something to do with her going. I wish we knew what was in it.”

George raised eyes heavy with pain to Dudley’s face, and replied, “You said her room had been searched.”

“I don’t know that it has been done thoroughly. I went and looked here and there on the tables and bed, and so on. There was no letter or paper left for us; I can answer for that. But I cut it rather short—I couldn’t stand it.”

“That letter might have given us some clue, perhaps,” said George drearily. He was utterly exhausted in mind and body by all he had gone through, and Dudley was, if anything, in a more pitiable condition still.

“Let us go again,” said the latter. “Perhaps it would be better.”

They went into the room. There, still on the floor, was the poor child’s wedding-dress.

Her white bonnet, gloves, and handkerchief were lying on the bed; and all the pretty confusion of a girl's toilet table which has been recently used was to be seen, and the least trifle which showed that she had moved or touched it had the power of sending a thrill of pain through the hearts of those who now looked on it. There, too, was the bouquet which had been sent from Breamore that morning, lying bright, crisp, and almost insolent in its freshness amidst the desolation of that room.

“Ah!” said Dudley when he saw it, “I wish to God those Templemores had kept themselves and their flowers out of our way this day. It is they who have brought this on us.”

George could not speak. All he saw affected him so acutely; the stillness seemed like death. He thought of that poor girl so tender, loving, and helpless, hunted out of this her maiden bower by harshness and wrong-doing, and want of comprehension of her gentle, loyal nature; and driven—where? He stooped to pick up her dress; it seemed

to him a profound disrespect to let it lie uncared for there. As he lifted it from the ground, he discovered a paper lying on the carpet beneath it. It was the squire's letter which they were in search of. Dudley almost clutched at it, so eager was he to see it.

"Oh, it is from the father!" said he, for he saw the signature of Bernard Templemore in the squire's bold writing at the foot of the page.

"What did you expect to find?" said George, with some irritation.

Dudley's manner and Dudley's words and suspicions jarred with his feelings, and with the memories of her kindness, her patience, her purity, and goodness, which were now crowding round that sad image of her which had since the morning made its home in his heart. Dudley made no answer, and the two read the letter.

"But did she refuse them admittance?" asked George, when they got to that part of it.

"Yes; but it was my doing mostly. I will tell you about it after. Stop! What is this?"

‘Twelve p.m. to-morrow (the day of your marriage) will see him begin his journey southward, and next day he will go farther still, till he gets to the shores of the Mediterranean, etc.’” Dudley looked in George’s face, and said, “We must go to the railway station at once—we have just time;” and they went downstairs immediately to go.

George hated Dudley for making the suggestion; but the doubt had arisen in his own mind also. Could Audrey have caught at that piece of information and have gone off with Brian Templemore? And had the sending back of the indenture helped to bring this on them? They did not lose a moment. On a day when every painful contingency had to be taken into account, this too must not be neglected. It was too late to get a cab readily, and the two walked so quickly that the difference of speed between walking and driving was not great; but they reached the middle of the hill on which the station was built just in time to hear and see a heavy black mass shriek itself away into the darkness.

Dudley stopped short, saying, “Good God!

we are too late!" George, with a deathly white face, hurried on. "We must ask about it at the station—we can see some of the officials. Let us lose no time; this is the last train, and the men will all be leaving directly."

George's manner was entirely changed. The quick walk, with its one purpose so set before him, had made other doubts, other fears, cluster about that one big fear, and it had gathered strength, and he was ill with anxiety and dread that she was gone.

He knew the station-master well, and he was on the platform; but when they came up to him, George said in a voice of entreaty, "You speak to him, Dudley."

And Dudley questioned him about Brian Templemore, and heard that he had started by the train just gone; that he had come up to the station "latish" in a hackney cab from the Mitre, and had just had time to take his ticket for London and go.

"Alone?" That was the only word George could say; but he said it promptly.

"No, sir, he was not alone. There was a

young lady, or a young woman with him—I can hardly say what she was, she kept her face that closely covered up with a thick black veil; and you see it is so dark here on the platform, sir.”

“But had she any luggage?”

“Not a scrap, sir. I wish you had been five minutes earlier, sir. If I had only had the sense to think in time, perhaps I might have done something.”

He said this very sympathetically, for he and all Dorminster knew their fears. He wondered to himself now that he had not thought of Miss Wentworth, when he saw that young lady trying to get away unnoticed. He knew that they had talked of dragging the river; and now, when he looked in the haggard faces of the two men by his side, he saw that a new terror had arisen in their minds, and that even death was not their most dreaded danger.

“Then nothing can be done till five in the morning. That is the first train, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir, the government goes then; it is the first.” (In those days no one could send

a telegram from Dorminster). "If you please, Mr. Copeland, the hackney cab-driver is here. You could question him if you liked. He is somewhere about, I know, for his cab is still standing."

The cab-driver was unearthed, and he said that Mr. Templemore had driven up to the Mitre about eight o'clock in the carriage, and there was a young person with him, who was, he said, his sister's French governess going back to Paris. They had gone into a private room and ordered tea, and waited there till it was time to go to the train; at least, that was what he (the man) had heard, and that she had kept in a dark part of the room lying on a sofa, and no one had seen her face, not even Mr. Templemore's coachman.

"Is that all you know, then?" asked Dudley impatiently—his troubles were beginning to be too much for him.

"No, sir. I know what the coachman told us, of how they fell in with her; for he only laughed when any of us said she was the governess. But he said he did really believe it was quite by accident that they fell in

with her, for when they started from Breamore, Mr. Brian did not mean to go to the Mitre at all, but to Canon Wiltshire's to dinner. They knew he was going away, and they asked him; and he was to dine there and spend the evening, and then go on to the station in a cab and let his father's horses and carriage get home in good time; but after he lighted on the young woman, Mr. Brian gave up all thoughts of going to Canon Wiltshire's, and drove straight to the Mitre instead. He gave the coachman a suvvering, and said he was to tell Squire Templemore that he (Mr. Brian, you know, sir) had got put too late for the dinner in the college, so he had gone to the hotel instead, and to be pertikler sure to say nothing about the young woman, and no more he will."

"Did he call her the young woman?" said Dudley in a fury.

"Well, sir, I ax your pardon, sir, but I can't say but what he did."

"Go on," said George. "Let us know where he met her. That is what we want to know."

“ Well, sir, he said he was driving Mr. Brian quiet and steady along the Dorminster road, and when they had got to a hill about four miles from Breamore, and were going gently up a declivity, all of a sudden, as if she sprang from the ground, a young woman she stepped up to him and said, in a neat, pretty voice, ‘ Is that Mr. Templemore’s carriage, please ? ’ And when he said ‘ Yes ’ to that too, she asked him to stop, and went up to the window and said, ‘ Oh, Mr. Templemore, you will be surprised to see me here, but do take me into the carriage. I have walked more than ten miles, and I am so tired and ill with it, and I have something I really must say to you.’ That was what she said, for the coachman told us ; only, of course, he could not speak half so pretty as she could.”

“ Go on ! ” said Dudley. “ What next ? ”

“ Well, Mr. Brian, he thought, did not seem as if he quite wanted her to come in ; but he opened the door at last, for she said she had so much to tell him, and the coachman he heard them talking all the way, grave and serious ; but by the time he saw the lights

of Dorminster, Mr. Brian put out his head and said, 'I am not going to Canon Wiltshire's, James, so drive at once to the Mitre.' So James could do no other than obey. And when they got to the Mitre, Mr. Brian stepped out and bespoke a private room; and then, when folks seemed all quite out of the way, he took her in and set her down, and there they stayed till it was time to go to the station for the train. That is all I know, sir; and now, sir, if you'd like me to get a glass when I go back, to drink your good health, I'll not say no."

They gave him some money, and they made no useless requests that he would be silent—that and all else would, by mid-day to-morrow, be known over all Dorminster.

"But what brutes the people at the Mitre were not to send for me!" said Dudley in a low voice. "They might have done that. Good God, George! what disgrace has come upon us; for that must have been Audrey."

"Wait before you say that," said George; "I have faith in her yet!"

Then they got into the cab and drove to their homes, huddled a few clothes into their bags, and prepared to go southwards at five in the morning.

CHAPTER IX.

“I cannot speak, nor think,
Nor dare to know that which I know.—Oh, sir.”

WINTER'S TALE.

THE month of December was nearly over, and George Copeland and Dudley Wentworth were still in pursuit of Audrey. Ever since they left Dorminster they had been tantalized by finding one trace after another of the fugitives, but always just too late. At Marseilles they all but came up with them, arriving at the Hôtel d'Angleterre exactly half an hour after Monsieur and Madame Templemore had embarked in the African boat for Ajaccio. They could even see the smoke of their steamer curling spitefully as it bore away into the clear distance those of whom they were in search. All they heard of madame pointed only too surely to the truth of their worst fears—she

was of middle height, slim, very beautiful, but pale, “habillée en vraie Anglaise” (which they took as a sneer at Audrey’s simple taste in dress), and very *triste* when left alone. It was certain that the poor child would be *triste*—but the two who were hurrying after her were still more so. Dudley had the stings of his own conscience to struggle with, and George was bitterly distressed by the thought that somehow, without in the least intending it, they had one and all coerced Audrey. The marriage had been too hurried. It had taken place before her heart was quite her own to give; and though, to do her justice, she had tried to overcome her love for Brian, it had risen up at the last in protest and rebellion against what she had done. If George had had any idea of the effort it must have cost her to accept him, he would not have permitted such a sacrifice. He felt rather sore about Dudley’s share in the matter, for he, her own brother, must have known what a trial her acquiescence in their wishes was to her. George had never liked Dudley much; he liked him still less now, for he was afraid

money had had much to do with his ready consent to the marriage, and with the zeal which he had shown in forwarding it. Until after Audrey's flight, George had known nothing of the conversation which had taken place during Dudley's illness, about the disposition of Mr. Copeland's money in case Audrey married himself. His father had rather wished to keep the knowledge of it from him. Perhaps he instinctively thought that George might feel that too much was being done for Dudley, or that it was not fair to Osmunda; or, still more likely, he might have quarrelled with the arrangement as likely to tempt Dudley to use undue influence with his sister. Mr. Copeland himself did not want undue influence used, but thought any girl who got George for a husband so sure to be happy that, if she did not quite see the matter properly for herself, she might be only too thankful if those who did see it did use a little persuasion for her own good.

George, however, knew nothing of all this. But on that day of confusion and grief, every-

thing which had been hitherto concealed was made known: no one liked the responsibility of keeping back any piece of information the want of which might affect their chance of recovering sight of the lost one. Dudley alone dared not tell his share in driving her from home; he preserved a gloomy silence, and was much admired for the intensity of his affection. Mr. Copeland at once made it public that he had altered his will according to promise, and said that he had noticed the strange change which came over Audrey at once as soon as he told her what he had done for Dudley, and had remarked that she never looked like herself again after that. George had not said much about this to Dudley; he felt too sorry for him to do so; but though Dudley kept silence about his own treachery, George could not help discovering that great pressure had been used; and later in the day, when the squire's letter was found, he was obliged to demand from him an explanation of the words in which Mr. Templemore referred to being denied admittance.

Dudley's reply was cold and surly. All he

said was, that the squire and his son had called just before the wedding-day, and he had luckily been in the way, and able to prevent them from seeing Audrey. He knew the sight of Brian could only distress her, and for the same reason he had ordered Polly to say nothing about the visit. He thought in this he had acted wisely and well, and for her true happiness. If George thought differently, he regretted it; but even if Audrey had heard of their visit afterwards, that was not enough to account for such a change in her.

Perhaps not; but that, taken with other things, had done it only too surely; and now there was every reason to apprehend something very bad, for if she was not lying in some quiet reach of the river, or if she had not eloped with Mr. Templemore, where was she? Her flight had evidently been quite unpremeditated. She had seen no one, and had had no letters from any one ever since her return from the south. Dudley himself had testified to that. And yet she had been so sure of her own plan that she had executed

it at once. The result had proved it was well laid.

The poor old squire's letter had no doubt revealed to her the deception of which she had been the victim, and supplied the information as to Brian Templemore's movements, which alone could have ensured success. So thought George; but Dudley was sure that she must have questioned Polly, and have learnt all there was to learn from her. But he kept that belief for his own private misery; and each of the two men had one thought more, which they were jealously careful not to share with each other—that perhaps in that letter of the squire's a letter from Brian had been enclosed; a letter which had worked this woe; a letter which she had carried away with her.

Eager as they were to get on, they were obliged either to wait another week in Marseilles for a boat to Ajaccio, or go on to Nice and wait for one there. They went to Nice, but even that plan involved a delay of five days. Ever since they first set out, these vexatious interruptions had occurred.

At last, after a stormy passage, they found

themselves in the Gulf of Ajaccio—a placid harbour, with wild mountains rising behind it, and more and more beyond. And there, in that town, with its ugly square houses crowding to the very verge of the sea, they were, perhaps, to find Audrey.

A very few questions, when once on shore, produced a great deal of information. A young English milordo had arrived there five or six days before; had stayed at the Hôtel de France; had spent money as if it were water; had tired of Ajaccio in a day or two, and had hired a *berline* and taken his wife on a tour in the island.

“When did they start?” asked George.

They had started two days before. But when George said, “Then get a *berline* ready for us, too!” he met with the answer—“Impossible, monsieur!” And they were told that it was impossible to go up amongst the mountains, for a snow-storm had begun twenty-four hours before, and by this time the roads would be impassable.

“A snow-storm!” said Dudley contemptuously, looking at two or three white flakes

fluttering about in the air, and looking as if reluctant to fall to the ground, so sure they were of finding no resting-place. "Well, if they call that a snow-storm, I wonder what they would think if they saw one of ours? They must want to keep us here."

"Gentlemen, it is snowing hard over there now," said the landlord, with a wave of the hand towards the pass of Vivario, by which their road lay. "It never snows here; but if you were to go you would find drifts ten or twelve feet deep; it would be impossible even to guess at the road."

They did not doubt him longer, and soon found that even in severe frost it was not safe to make that journey up and down roads cut in the sides of the mountains, with no parapet or protection of any kind from a terrific slide on the ice and a fall over a precipice of thousands of feet.

Once more the two men looked at each other in irritated dismay, for wherever they went everything was against them. Perforce they stayed where they were. The waiter told them that the milordo had left some

bagage with the landlord. It was too heavy for the *berline*. It was to stay at Ajaccio till he decided whether he was going to return to the continent that way or not; if he did not, the landlord was to send the *malles* on to Bastia. Dudley went to look at these *malles*, to see if their owner's name was on them, and saw what he expected to see—"B. W. Templemore" in clearly written characters; and, besides, there was a box with the name of Mrs. Templemore on it. It was maddening to be imprisoned by a snow-storm, and know that those whom they were pursuing had two days' start.

"They will be imprisoned, too!" said George, with a sudden idea.

The landlord thought they might have got as far as Corte before the storm became really bad, but they would certainly have to stay there. If monsieur really wished to meet with these *voyageurs* so much, it was a pity he had not landed at Bastia instead of Ajaccio. The roads between Ajaccio and Corte were far worse in times of snow than those between Corte and Bastia. The forest of Vizzavona

was often impassable in winter. This hint, however, came too late to be of any service. There was nothing for it but to wait.

At last, after a wearisome delay of a whole fortnight, they were able to go on. Then they at once hired a *berline* and went; and when they saw the roads, they frankly admitted that the dangers of the journey in stormy weather had not been exaggerated. They were cut straight through desolate valleys; they zigzagged up and down lonely mountain-sides—it seemed impossible to imagine a sublimer or more terrible route than that which Dudley and George were taking on this wild January day. Heavy clouds hung close above their heads; gaunt rocks gave all their strength to buttressing up mountains of which our travellers could see nothing but the glistening wet slopes lying on their right hand; more clouds lay down below them in the ravines, whose depth could only be guessed at; waterfalls came tumbling down they knew not from whence. They passed through forests of pines or gigantic beech-trees, but they hardly ever saw a human

habitation or any sign of life, unless some poor shepherd, closely covered in his *pilone*, stood sadly gazing on them as they passed by. And that they might know that what they felt was not simply due to the effect of the dark and stormy weather, and the low-lying clouds and their own imaginations, their driver began to recount how here the diligence had rolled over the precipice, and a priest who would not get out and walk up the slippery hill had gone with it, and how his body had not been found for months; and there a lady had perished by a slip, or a certain Fiordispina, a *voceratrice*, had been saved by falling into a thick tree. But escapes counted for very little in his records. The whole course of the route for some time seemed marked by misadventure or deeds of violence, and one glance of the eye to the unprotected side made any of these stories credible. Then he pointed with some pride to the black crosses raised by the wayside to mark the spot where a murder had been committed. Not that he called it a murder; it was rather that here this or that person “avait reçu un bon

coup.” “Et v’là, monsieur!” said he, pointing to the cross to show what had been the end of it. The crosses were numerous enough, and sometimes formed a group of three or four painfully near together; and the words, “vendetta,” “mala morte,” etc., garnished his discourse with startling frequency; and if either George or Dudley spoke in disapprobation of taking life, the driver was aggrieved, and said, “Qui ne tue pas quelque fois?”

It was rare that they saw any hamlet larger than a mere handful of ill-built cottages, and still more rare to see any signs of cultivation; and the land was a never-ending tangle of juniper and arbutus, of tamarisk and wild olive trees, of briony, clematis, myrtle, and every kind of shrub. It was too early for flowers yet, but here, there, and everywhere hellebore hung its sickly green bells.

“This *macchia*,” said Dudley, “is really just as savage as an African bush. Flowering shrubs are more poetical than Wart-eeen-beeze thorns and aloes, and such things; but we may have too many even of them, and I am truly thankful I don’t live here.”

“But what divine scenery!” replied George.

And so passed that day, and so, after sleeping at Bocognano, passed the next.

“Corte is one of the best towns in the island,” said Dudley, when about three in the afternoon they came to a height from whence they looked down on some tall, cold-looking stone houses in a hollow below, at the meeting point of three valleys.

“Then that is not it!” said George.

But it was, and there was the citadel with all the houses crowding up against the steep rock on which it stood, and Monte Rotondo looking down, and glimpses up the valleys, and an old bridge over a swift river, and, in fact, scenery which would have driven a landscape painter wild, but made our travellers shiver.

It was about half-past three when they reached the principal inn, a dingy enough place so far as looks went. Drearily they ascended the dirty stairs, wondering as they went what life was going to bring them in Corte. Some one left a room as they were going up, and without turning round went slowly upstairs before them. George touched

Dudley's arm, and they both saw that it was Brian Templemore; and, dismissing the servant who was with them, they without a moment's hesitation opened the door he had just shut, and instantly found themselves face to face with—Polly!

That meeting, so unexpected by all three, for the moment acted like an electric shock, and no one could speak. She had been sitting reading near the fire, and hearing the door open, she turned and saw who had come in. She turned very pale. George looked at her steadily as she shrank painfully from meeting his eyes. She was prettily dressed in black silk. She wore a handsome watch and chain, but no wedding ring—he saw that in half a second.

“Polly!” said he in great astonishment, even while he was taking note of these things.

“Mary!” cried Dudley in a voice of reproach and wonder. “You here! Ah! we were afraid of finding my poor sister here. God be thanked that it is you.”

Polly's eyes flashed, his words hurt her so,

though she did not wholly understand what he meant by Miss Wentworth being there. She rose and said with some dignity—

“Gentlemen, I don’t think this is your room.”

“You are right!” said George, moving to the door; then he turned back to her and said, “I can’t go away from you in this way without a word, Mary—I can’t thank God you are here! I am very much grieved to find you. Will you let me take care of you back to England and your own home at Minster-acres?”

George’s voice was so kind that Polly’s first impulse was towards gratitude, but she shook her head and said, “That cannot be, Mr. George. You had better leave me.”

“Leave you, do you say?” began Dudley in a very important, authoritative manner, adopted because he felt he had a right to use it when addressing one who had been a retainer of the family from her youth up. “Mary, it is really painful and sad——”

“Mr. Wentworth,” said Polly, interrupting him instantly, “I don’t mind what Mr.

George says to me, but I will not be lectured by you."

"Mary, you——Well, we had, as you say, better leave you," replied Dudley, "especially as you seem so inclined to forget yourself. But stay! Are you able to give us any information about your mistress?"

Polly winced a little at the word.

"Are you aware that she disappeared the day she was married, just after you were in her room, and that she has never been heard of since? We are in search of her; that is why we are here."

Slowly, while he spoke, Polly began to understand that they had imagined that Miss Audrey might have eloped with Mr. Templemore, and she stood blushing with a complication of unpleasant thoughts and recollections, and not knowing what to say. But George could not bear to have Audrey's name brought in in this manner, or to allow it to appear that, let facts look as condemnatory as they could, they had dared to doubt her; and he cut this short at once, and said—

"Say no more about it, Dudley. We ought

to have known her better than think for an instant she would do such a thing."

This speech cut Polly to the heart. She raised deprecating eyes to George; but George was inexpressibly mortified at having wronged Audrey thus, even in thought, and could feel nothing else.

Polly began to look more and more miserable, as one fear after another about Audrey took possession of her, and Dudley began to be afraid lest she might say something which would be better left unsaid; but before going he asked, "Had you anything to do with helping my sister to leave her home?"

"No," replied Polly earnestly, "nothing—nothing at all. I was very glad to get away myself, for she was very angry with me, and said things which I never can forget."

Polly looked as if she were going to cry. Dudley, seeing that she knew nothing of where Audrey was, longed to go away, but goaded by George's evident intention of knowing what Audrey had said to Polly, and why she had been so angry, and by his own fear of appearing wanting in rightful urgency of inquiry,

said, "And what was she so angry about? Polly, I insist on knowing."

"Oh, you can know if you like, Mr. Wentworth," said Polly contemptuously; "but I don't think you need ask me. You must know what she was likely to question me about, and you must know what she made me tell her."

Dudley almost changed countenance. Polly had been so willing to help him before that he had not expected her to turn so completely against him, and was not at all aware how offensive his manner was to her.

"I will explain to you what she means," said he, recovering himself promptly, to George. "If she has nothing more to tell us, let us go. But first, Mary, assure me of one thing; you do not know where your mistress is, or where she was likely to go?"

"God help me! no," said Polly; "but I do feel so afraid of something bad having happened."

"I don't!" cried Dudley angrily. He did, but he hated his own fears to be put into shape. "I don't feel at all afraid. She is not

one of the weak ones who fly to the river at the first touch of pain ! ”

Polly's lip curled contemptuously ; she turned away from Dudley. “ Mr. Copeland,” said she, “ from the bottom of my heart I wish I could tell you where that dear lady is. Many a time I have behaved ill to her, many a time I have given her a sharp answer, but it was trouble drove me to it, and if anything has happened to her, I shall never forgive myself, for—— ” And Polly broke down, and words were lost in sobs.

“ Come, George, let us leave her,” said Dudley ; “ she knows nothing.”

“ I know nothing but what you know and what you had much better tell,” said Polly indignantly through her tears. She was vexed to death at Dudley's insulting manner, and his rudeness in speaking of her as “ she.”

Dudley at once left the room. George followed almost directly. He intended to make Dudley speak out now, and preferred that course to questioning Polly. But when he was halfway upstairs he found she had run after him. She clung to the banisters as she said—

“Mr. George, you don’t really think she has done anything?” And at the sound of these words, the most direct which Polly could force herself to use to hint at the idea of suicide, her tears flowed afresh.

“Polly,” said he, melted by the poor girl’s distress, “everything looks very bad, but I honestly tell you I don’t believe she has. I believe she is hiding from us somewhere. I believe she is safe.”

George said this; but even through the tears which blinded her eyes, she saw how changed he was since the days when he used to look so happy, when he came to spend the evenings in Flower Gate. She thought a minute and shook her head.

“If you knew how I felt, and if you knew the things that were done to her, and if you had seen her face after she had made me tell her! Oh, Mr. George, I shall never know what it is to be happy again!”

“What did they do to her?” cried George impetuously.

“Ask *him*,” replied Polly. “If he won’t tell you the truth, I will. But, Mr. George, if

you want to see me again, don't let it be when Mr. Templemore is in. I don't want him to know anything about it—he must not.” And she almost trembled as she said it.

“Polly,” said George, “if I offend you, you must forgive me. I am interested in you, and can't help speaking, and I am afraid you are doing very wrong in living here with Mr. Templemore.

“Never mind about me!” she exclaimed. “If she is gone, it does not much matter what becomes of me!”

That was a bit of true feeling breaking out. The next minute she repented having made the admission her words implied. She clung to his good opinion, and added—

“I think, Mr. Copeland, perhaps you are under some mistake about me. You think I am not married, but I am.”

“I am heartily glad of it,” said George; and then he hurried away to seek Dudley.

He found him in a state of unreasoning grief. He had had time to forget his fear of Polly's betraying him, and to remember that their one hope of finding Audrey was gone. She

was dead ! George roused him as well as he could, hardly seeking to comfort him so much as to learn the worst he had to tell at once. He insisted on knowing all. Dudley did not tell him all, but he told him enough to raise his hearty indignation and contempt. And George expressed both these feelings so openly that a violent quarrel was the result, and Dudley left him in anger. He at once ordered a conveyance of some kind to take him back to Ajaccio. None was to be had, and, late as it was, Dudley declared he would walk rather than stay a single hour longer in the same house with George. He was resolved to get back to England to continue his search for Audrey. He knew George intended setting out for home next day ; all the more reason for him to go that night. How he wished he could abridge the terrible distance. His one desire was to get quickly back. It was grievous to think of the time they had lost by leaving England.

The frost had returned, and the snow was beginning to fall again. The landlord predicted another heavy storm, and told

Dudley that it was madness for him to set out at this time of the day, and that the roads would be sheets of ice. Dudley would not listen, and actually set off, though there was no hope of his getting farther than Vivario, if even he got so far.

After wandering half the night, he found his way back to Corte, weary and ill, and suffering such pain in his chest that he was thankful to creep into bed and accept all the care George could give him.

This second storm lasted a fortnight, but if it had been ever such fine weather, neither Dudley nor George could have moved from Corte. The former was as ill as he was when poor Audrey watched by his bedside and drove away the cows to keep his rest unbroken. When he recovered a little, he ordered George to leave him, and said he would rather die than owe his life to him. But there was no doctor near worthy of trust, no one in the hotel competent to look after him, and George felt it would be dangerous to obey. He stayed and nursed him; and at last even Dudley's anger, and bitterness, and rage

against George for having made him feel how contemptible and unworthy his own conduct had been, were not able to hold out against day after day of patient, kind, and unwearied attention.

CHAPTER X.

“Be merry, gentle;
Strangle such thoughts as these.”

WINTER'S TALE.

WHEN George Copeland went to seek Dudley, Polly returned to her own room and sat alone, thinking with pain enough that Audrey had put an end to her life, and that she had helped to drive her to do it. Bitterly Polly had felt her reproaches the day of her marriage. She had gone out of the house in such a state of misery that she did not feel safe in her own company, and she had set off to Minsteracres on foot, to seek shelter with her poor old aunt.

The reader knows what happened. She met Brian, who, reckless now and miserable, and shrinking from being alone, had drifted into doing what seemed the most removed

from his thoughts an hour or two before. He knew nothing of Audrey's disappearance; only that it was her wedding-day, and that he had lost her. Here was Polly clinging to him, and loving him as no one else had ever done, and only begging him not to drive her out of his sight again, now that she had once more found him. Ah! how transported she had been at first with the thought that he did love her after all, and that now she had got him entirely to herself; but she soon began to find flaws in her happiness, and to discover that she was not nearly so much to him as she had expected to be. She had no power to lighten his fits of despondency when they took possession of him. They did so very frequently. He was evidently suffering the loss of Audrey keenly, and there was a recklessness in his way of talking which shocked Polly; and occasionally a tendency to drive away heavy thought by drinking deeply which alarmed her. She interpreted all these things as signs of want of respect for herself—he would not, she thought, have behaved in that way before any one who was really married to him.

For Polly, alas ! was not married. She had found the shame she felt in George's presence so unbearable that she had taken refuge in a lie, hoping it would shelter her while he was there.

Brian was not by any means always low-spirited, and when like himself, lavished kindness on her, bought her dresses and pretty things of all kinds, and took her to see sights likely to please her. "To live in towns and see grand sights" had once been the dream of her life, and now from time to time she had her wish. In fact, until she came to Corsica, she had lived in a perpetual round of change. Still she had not been happy ; there was always the feeling, which she could not get rid of, that she had purchased the enjoyment of these things by wrong-doing, and that sooner or later Brian would despise her for it. The thought was torture to her. If she lost his love now, she felt that death was all she would have left to her. She began to look for all the loopholes by which it might escape from her. She was painfully conscious that she did not always speak correctly, or receive little acts

of politeness from strangers with the easy, natural air of a person accustomed to attention and deference. She was either too grateful or too indifferent and thankless. On these occasions Brian always looked annoyed, and she fell into greater errors still from pitiable nervousness. She anxiously did her very best to make herself more on an equality with him, listening to every hint which dropped from his lips on these points, and hastening to do whatever she thus discovered to be right.

As a servant Polly had always had an air of being above her station, and as the house-keeper's niece, she had had a rather better education than most servants. Many a one who saw her in those old Minsteracres days had said, "If that girl were but well dressed and had the money to spend on herself which most young ladies have, how she would out-shine ninety-nine out of every hundred of them one meets," and she had secretly indulged in the same belief. But dressing her like a lady was precisely the thing which was fatal to her; she was so very far from looking

the part she was expected to play. All the little awkwardnesses which pass unnoticed or are tolerated as unavoidable in a girl of the class to which she belonged, jarred on Brian's nerves sometimes, and jarred the more that he was ashamed to show what he felt. But when Polly "jumped straight on to her feet" to get him something he wanted, to use her own expression, he liked the look of the deed no better than he liked the sound of the words she chose to express the idea of getting up quickly, and he did not like her to wait upon him, and had great difficulty in preventing himself from telling her so or saying, "Please, Polly, do try to be a little more quiet and ladylike in your movements," and yet for a servant her movements had been rather graceful than otherwise. He never by any chance rebuked her for any of these things, but she always saw that she had done wrong somehow, and wondered more and more what this mysterious something which constituted being a lady was. In old times she would have said having nothing to do and wearing good clothes. To her mind the latter condition was fulfilled

by wearing black silk. Besides this, she read a great deal and was always careful to speak in a low voice. What could it be that was wanting? Nothing, so far as the outward eye was concerned, that she could discover except the trifles of manner just mentioned, which she was going to amend.

If Brian had known the story of her life the last few months, she could have understood his thinking her no lady; but he did not, and must never do so. She herself looked back on all she had done while under Dudley Wentworth's roof with unmitigated shame; that whole time was one black period of utter disgrace, the only possible excuse for which was madness. And mad she must have been, or how could she, whose worst crime till she went to Dorminster had been discontent, have suddenly turned into a devil? For that was the word she now applied to herself when she thought of what she had done there. She often remembered with humiliation a conversation she had had with Miss Wentworth, when she first saw her. She had then confided to her her desire to be a lady; her long-

ing to know if she ever should be one. Audrey had not seemed to understand her, and then had gone away and thought it over, and had come back and said—

“Polly, I should like to tell you what I think about you, and other nice pretty girls, who think it hard that they cannot be ladies. Don’t be offended, dear Polly,” she had said, “but it is not wearing pretty dresses and having plenty of money to spend, and nothing to do but amuse themselves, which will make ladies of them, but learning to act up to ladies’ ideas of honour. When ladies look down upon servants, it is not because of their work, or manners, or dress, but because many of them have such slippery ideas of truth, that they will tell a lie without pain or difficulty, rather than own a fault honestly; and they do not care how ill they do their work, and put their mistresses off with false excuses, and have no shame if they are found out. That makes the great difference between them and ladies. A lady who was discovered to have told a lie would be disgraced for ever, and a servant ought to feel the same. Now

you, Polly, I am sure, would do none of these bad things, but there are some who do ; and the only true way to rise is to be absolutely truthful and honourable, so that those you live with feel that you can be trusted as they trust themselves."

Miss Wentworth had said that she was sure Polly would do none of these bad things. She had spoken very differently that last day, and the words she had then used had cut deeply into Polly's heart and soul. They and her own thoughts would sting her for ever. She meant henceforth to be truthful, but never to let Brian know one word of her wicked disgraceful past. She was truly glad she had not told him already. For when she met him on Audrey's wedding-day, it had been in her mind to tell him all ; of course throwing most of the blame on Mr. Wentworth. But when she saw that Brian accepted the fact of the marriage with a hopeless resignation, she dared not say anything likely to change that mood into fury, or make him despise herself just when he was in some degree restored to her. She therefore merely

told him how very, very wretched she had been—wretched to the point of flying to death as a means of escape. That act of despairing devotion produced a great effect on Brian, who was just in the state when a woman's love and sympathy were of the highest value to him. He was deeply touched by her fidelity, but he would never have urged her to go with him if she herself had not piteously entreated him not to drive her away from him again. Then he clutched at the idea of companionship: to go away alone appeared such unredeemed misery now that there were so many subjects too painful for him to think of.

They too had been snowed up at Corte, and at first Brian had found it horribly dull. It would soon have been unbearable if some of the officers in the castle had not taken kindly to him, and helped him to pass the time. Polly was much more to be pitied, for she spent many a lonely hour. She would, indeed, have had no one but Brian to speak to, had not a middle-aged English lady, who was staying in the hotel, suddenly taken a great fancy to her.

This lady, Miss Vaughan by name, could talk French and Italian, and even a little of the *patois* of the island; whereas Polly, of course, was unable to understand a word of any foreign language, and could only pat the heads of the landlady's little children, and smile gratefully at the big ones when, as was frequently the case, they performed any act of kindness to her.

Cecco, the eldest son of the house, a very polite boy of sixteen, with a wonderful Napoleonic face, was ill, and one evening Polly heard he was dead. Cecco had been very kind to her, had brought her flowers which he had had to disinter from their white covering of snow to find, had taken her to the stable to show her a pet moufflon, and had shot blackbirds for her.

Miss Vaughan told her he was dead, and that, in accordance with the code of etiquette of the island, she, who was almost naturalized there, meant to pay a ceremonial visit to the room where he was lying.

In Polly's rank of life at home such visits are almost *de rigueur* also. So when Miss

Vaughan said, "Will you come with me?" Polly was by no means averse, but said that she had no mourning.

"It is not needed; the gayer and richer your dress is, the greater the compliment, only we must take lighted candles with us—the biggest we can get."

They went to the room where the poor boy was lying in his last long sleep. Some time before they reached it they heard the cries of the mourners, and when they entered they saw fifteen or twenty women shrouded in black mantles, with dishevelled hair falling loosely over their shoulders, moving round and round the bier, uttering as they went those despairing cries, beating their breasts, tearing their hair, and covering themselves with dust. These were the Piagnoni. Round and round they went, and their wails became louder, and their grief still more frantic; and sometimes between the waving and streaming black mantles, or arms tossed hither and thither in wildest gesticulation, a glimpse of the dead boy was seen, lying calm and still amid this turmoil of lamentation. His face was very

beautiful. They had laid his head on a pillow, and put on him a Phrygian cap, and dressed him in his very best clothes; and friends and relations stood in a row on each side of the room, with long lighted tapers in their hands.

Suddenly the procession stopped; the Pia-
gnoni were dumb. They all huddled their
mantles about them, and cowered down on
the floor in a half-kneeling posture, with their
heads sunk low on their breasts. None of the
bystanders spoke, none moved, and there was
a long silence. Then one of them sprang to
her feet and began a song of her own making
in praise of the dead.

“How frightful she looks!” whispered
Polly. “Oh, Miss Vaughan, is she mad?”

For the woman’s gestures and bearing were
expressive of the most ungovernable grief and
despair.

At the end of each verse the chorus of
wailers joined in with their tribute of woe,
and when her dirge was over, she dropped
down into her place in the circle on the floor,
hid her face, and again there was a silence
from all but sobs and heavy moans.

“Oh, do let us go!” again whispered Polly. “I cannot bear it; it makes me so miserable, and I can’t help being so frightened.”

“Stay a moment,” said Miss Vaughan, for the doorway was blocked by the arrival of new visitors. More and more followed, and as each person entered, the father or mother went through the form of addressing the dead as if still alive, and goading him to shake off sloth and rise.

Perhaps the poor mother saw that Polly was ill at ease, and wished to go, for she said—

“Ah! Cecco, my Cecco, dost thou not see that the beautiful English lady whom thou likest so much is here? She has come to see thee, my son, and thou liest idly there and dost not rise. Get up at once, and thank her for the visit. She has missed thee during these last days, and has come to see why thou hast never gone out. She is pale—she feels thy unkindness towards her. Rise, my son, and thank her for coming. Ah! Cecco, Cecco, I talk to thee, and thou liest there. Will nothing make thee hear? There in that

corner is thy gun ; take it and shoot for her some of the birds she likes so much."

Miss Vaughan held Polly's hand firmly all this time. She knew that she had no idea of what the mother was saying ; but she was afraid that she would guess from so many eyes being now turned on her that some special address was being made to herself, and feel still more repugnance to remaining. To retreat then would have been unmannerly, so she held her. But Polly was only afraid of the Piagnoni, and could bear all else if they would but cease from their howlings and wailings.

A little movement amongst the people near the door announced another visit.

"Ah, Cecco !" cried the mother in a voice in which, in spite of grief, surprise was apparent, "thy Uncle Geronimo is here ! He has come, even thy uncle whom we have thought so unkind ! But he is unkind no longer. He is here ; rise and kiss his hand, my son. Tell him how we have felt his cruel words ; make him know how his absence has hurt us !" (This uncle had behaved ill

to the landlord's family, and home truths are told and tolerated on these occasions.) "Make haste, Cecco, make haste; when a near relation who has kept away so long because he believed false things of us comes to see us at last, is that a time to hold back and refuse to rise to greet him? He refuses still! Don't take it amiss, Geronimo; it is evening, and he sleeps, perhaps. He will give thee the hand when he awakes!"

Polly saw the poor woman's attitude of earnest entreaty, and with the assistance of a hint or two from Miss Vaughan readily interpreted the situation. She was deeply touched and began to cry. The boy's mother observed her, and said, "Cecco, look at the young English lady. She weeps; she does not like to see thee so perverse, so unkind to thy mother, who loves thee. She turns away; she will leave thee, Cecco. Thou wilt lose all thy friends!"

"What is she saying?" whispered Polly through her tears. "Do tell me, please, Miss Vaughan."

But when she understood what had been

said, she cried still more, and ran out, unable to bear the scene a moment longer; and as she went the mother's shrill, cutting tones of concentrated grief seemed to follow and haunt her.

"How can they say and do such dreadful things?" cried she to Miss Vaughan, when once more in her own room; "they can't be made of flesh and blood. Flesh and blood could not bear it!"

"They are used to these scenes from childhood. All this excitement helps them to go through the day. Death here is very frightful, for any one who dies must be buried in twenty-four hours."

"Poor fellow! his death has been so sudden. I hardly knew he was ill, and then I was told he was dead! What was it he died of, Miss Vaughan?"

"The doctor says it was cold to begin with, and inflammation, and then he got fever."

"Fever!" cried Polly aghast, and instantly overpowered with a nervous thrill of dread.

"Not an infectious fever. They say you have a fever here every time you have a cold."

“A fever!” again repeated Polly. “Oh, dear Miss Vaughan, you will see I shall catch it, and die!”

“But, my dear good Mrs. Templemore, will nothing convince you that it is not a real fever? Whenever they are a little feverish with a cold here, they call it a fever. You might live in terror every hour of the day if you listened to them; they do it all over the continent. I never pay any attention to them when they talk of fever.”

“It is all very well for her to laugh, but I shall die all the same,” thought Polly; and Miss Vaughan saw that she was still uneasy, and wished that she had not invited her to go with her, or at any rate not used the obnoxious word fever. She did what she could to reassure her; but after a little talk with the doctor, she was by no means easy herself, for it undoubtedly was a fever which had killed poor Cecco, though his illness had begun with a cold.

Polly sat alone nearly all the next day, tormenting herself with fears of every kind, from a dread of the fever to anxiety lest

Brian should be tiring of her. Surely some such feeling must be stealing over him, or why did he leave her so often? He was hours and hours with the officers; why did he never introduce any of them to her? She knew that one of them spoke English. She did not understand Brian's natural hesitation on this point, and thought that the omission betokened that he was ashamed of her.

It was a bitter cold day, and she sat over her wood fire listening to the last wails of the mourners, as the *Fratelli dei Morti* came to bear away the bier. She heard the heavy sound of their feet as they descended the stairs, and the sound of their song as they wound their way up the street to the church, and then she knew that she should never see poor Cecco any more.

Not down here below; but something made her feel as if he had left her a heritage of his illness. She struggled against the thought, for she had no wish to die, but she fancied this might be God's way of punishing her for trying to take her life before. He had let her be saved then, to show that He was master; now, when she wished to live, when Brian

was hers and loved her (for however she might sometimes torment herself by doubting him, in her heart she knew he loved her)—now He was going to take her away!

Miss Vaughan came in, and found her sitting alone in this state of black despondency and certainty that she had the fatal illness already on her. She tried ridicule, anger, cheerfulness, and with some success; and when Brian came in, Polly dared say nothing of her fear. She was sure, if she did, he would be angry with her for going into the room at all—was sure he would think her foolish to be afraid of anything before it came, and certain that she must not bore him with too much apprehensiveness. She would see still less of him if she began to do that. She made a good fight to regain cheerfulness; but in spite of all she did, he saw and was much worried by her low spirits, though he had no idea of the cause, and spent still more time with his friends the officers. That did not tend to make her more happy; and besides these cares, she was night and day haunted and tortured by the thought of Audrey's looks and words, and unknown fate.

CHAPTER XI.

“*Hero.* O God, defend me ! how am I beset !—

What kind of catechizing call you this ? ”

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING.

“*Ber.* What would you have ?

Hel. Something ; and scarce so much :—nothing, indeed.

I would not tell you what I would : my lord—

’faith, yes ;—

Strangers, and foes, do sunder, and not kiss.”

ALL’S WELL THAT ENDS WELL.

“LITTLE Polly ! ” said Brian, coming in suddenly one day, “ what do you think ? There are two people from Dorminster staying in this very hotel—you will never guess who, so I will tell you ; but it really is wonderful, and I don’t understand their being here a bit. One is Dudley Wentworth, and he is dangerously ill with pleurisy or inflammation, or something of that kind ; and the other is

Mr. Copeland, who is nursing him. I wonder where Wentworth's sister is?"

"Oh, Brian! you don't know about her—I forgot that. I did not know either that they still were here, or that Mr. Wentworth was ill; but I knew they had been here, for I saw them."

"You saw them?"

"Yes. I never knew what to do about it—I mean about telling you of their coming or not; I was so afraid it would vex you."

"Do go on, Polly; you are far too mysterious and far too fond of keeping things to yourself. If you saw them here, why could you not tell me, as any one else would have done?"

"Brian, they came in here—here, in this very room. It is a long time since now, I dare say quite a fortnight, and they were in search of Miss Wentworth. They must have followed us all the way from England."

Brian shook his head in the utmost perplexity. He knew nothing of Audrey's flight,—could not see why these two men should follow him and Polly, and was rather afraid Polly was losing her wits.

“Did you not know that Miss Wentworth had run away on her wedding-day? And they, I suppose, heard of your going away with me, and they followed us all the way here. They thought she was the one who was—with—you.”

Polly said this very slowly, and with much effort, but she dared keep nothing from him now.

Brian turned very red, and looked strangely disturbed.

“Thought she was with me, the idiots, did they? They surely might have known her better than to suppose such a thing as that possible. With me! Good Heavens! what an insult to suppose such a thing!”

Ah! there was that speech again; he, too, said that—and Polly herself had done that thing, and was there now. Slow tears formed and stood in her eyes.

“Brian,” said she, going to him and laying her hand on his arm, “for God’s sake, don’t despise me for having loved you so much.”

“By Jove! no,” said he warmly, “I should think not. Why, I am very grateful

to you, Polly ; I should be miserable without you."

"But you say that it was an insult to Miss Wentworth to suspect her of being here with you."

"Of course it was ! That is quite different !" said Brian hurriedly.

That was so hard to bear. She did not want to be thought so different. Audrey was her very ideal of what a woman ought to be ; down to the most trifling article of dress, she copied her in everything. Brian saw Polly's anxious face, and kissed her.

"Don't worry about nothing," said he. "Don't you know I love you ?"

But Polly was beginning to feel how poor a thing love is if respect does not go with it.

It was some time before Brian began to distress himself about Audrey. He was secretly delighted that she had run away from Copeland. His own idea was that she had gone away to her great friend, Mrs. Armitage, at Bellosguardo, but he did not trust that secret even to Polly, for he did not wish to betray Audrey's retreat. But though he

laughed repeatedly at the thought of the fuss they must all have been in when they found that she was gone, he could not get so much as a smile out of Polly. Her conscience was busy, and she could not shake off the thoughts which oppressed her. It was very uncomfortable for Brian to be shut up in a dull place like Corte with any one who was determined to be perpetually disconsolate. Many a time he regretted having parted company with the bulk of his luggage. Now he must wait until the roads to Ajaccio were passable; otherwise, he might have made his way to Bastia, and have crossed to Italy. But there was no help for it.

He went out and hunted every shop in Corte, to find something he could buy for Polly, and so win a smile again. He found a showy Palais Royal looking locket, and took it home and made her bring a ribbon, and himself tied it round her neck.

“There, madam,” said he, “that is locket number two that you have had from me. I shall break loose in the direction of rings next. You are wearing gloves? That is right. Your

hand will be as pretty as anybody's in a short time, and quite fit for rings. By-the-by, where is the old locket? Have you lost it?"

"Lost it!" said she, in a tone of thorough astonishment. "I could not lose that! Here it is."

And so saying, she drew it out from under her dress.

"You wore it on a chain and in sight, and I wear it on a ribbon and hid, because it is so precious I like no one to see it but myself; but, with that exception, it is just exactly as it was the day you gave it to me."

"That it certainly is not," said he, "for when I gave it to you there was a paper in it."

"So there is now."

"Not that paper."

"That very paper."

"Polly, what a goose you are! Why, you sent it back to me yourself."

"I never sent it back. I tell you it is there!"

"I tell you you sent it back, and I burnt it. I wonder why you did send it."

"I never sent it back!" said she positively.

“ Show it to me, then ! ” said he.

“ I will,” she replied, beginning to open the locket.

“ Stop ! ” cried he, putting his hand on hers, and checking her. “ You have looked at it sometimes, of course ; tell me what was written on it, and what the paper itself was like, and then we will soon see which of us is right.”

“ It was like half a sheet of note paper, with one side clipped to look like a long row of W's, small and large, and on the paper was written in pencil, ‘ Brian William Templemore, February 10th, 1847. ’ ”

“ Exactly,” said he ; “ but you have not got it.”

“ But I assure you I have,” replied Polly ; and she opened her locket, and took out the paper it contained, triumphing by anticipation in Brian's downfall after so much positive assertion.

She saw that the clipped edge, which he was already beginning to catch sight of, surprised him. In another moment he would see his own name.

Brian did not take his eyes from the paper as she unfolded it, and he did indeed look astonished, but when it was entirely opened out, and they both saw the name, it was not Brian's, but that of Etheldreda Wentworth.

Polly's face showed the most bewildered astonishment; Brian's the strongest excitement and curiosity.

He spoke first.

"There, you see! I told you you had not got it. Now, please to tell me instantly where you got this?"

"I cannot," said Polly; "I don't even know myself."

And she spoke the truth, for she was wholly unconscious of having changed the indentures, and since that time when she had seen Audrey's name on that rival piece of paper, the paper in her own locket had ceased to have any value for her, and she had never once looked at it, and only spoke so confidently as to its being there because she knew the locket had never once been out of her own possession since Brian gave it to her.

“That paper you have there was Miss Wentworth’s half,” said he ; “ and she had it in her own keeping. Now, I insist on knowing how you got it. She gave it to you, perhaps ? ”

“ No, she did not.”

“ She threw it away and you took it ? ”

“ No.”

“ Then how and where did you get it ? ”

Slowly, while he was putting these questions, Polly arrived at the knowledge of the truth. She must have accidentally changed the papers on that one occasion when she had seen this one before. What was she to do and say now ? How all these mean and dishonourable deeds brought their own punishment with them !

“ I am waiting for your answer, Polly,” said Brian, seeing how loth she was to speak. “ You may as well tell me the truth at once, for know I will.”

It was speeches of this kind which wounded Polly so to the quick. He knew that she had been a servant, and assumed she had the usual servant’s code of honour. He never by any chance would have dared to use such language

to Miss Wentworth, or to doubt her truth ; and the worst was that his suspicions were, to judge by her own past, well founded.

“ Brian,” said she piteously, “ please say no more about it ; I don’t want to tell you.”

“ Did you steal it, then ? ” he asked, with more contempt in his voice than she could well endure.

“ I did not steal it,” she answered firmly.

“ Then, in the name of all that is wonderful, how did you get hold of it ? ”

Polly confessed. More than once her confessions of what her love had driven her to do had stood her in stead with Brian ; why should it not be so again ? Besides, she had told falsehoods enough ; she was ashamed and weary of them, and thought and hoped his love was now strong enough to bear the truth. And so it would have been had not her conduct caused him a loss of which she was ignorant—the loss of the reception of the proper half of the indenture and the timely knowledge it would have conveyed of Audrey’s intended marriage. If he had got that, he would have known she still loved him well enough to

think of her promise to him and keep it. That knowledge would have come with the news of the fortune Mrs. Maitland had left him. It would have changed the whole course of his life; and instead of his being an outcast now, and Audrey a fugitive, they would have been living happy in each other's love.

While he was thinking with extreme bitterness by how little he had lost the bliss which would thus have been his, for he never took into account the possibility that Audrey could love Copeland, Polly was continuing her confession, and at last the eagerness of her accents recalled his thoughts to her. She had been describing her own feelings—how she had cherished her locket, kissed the paper, etc.—and then she spoke of the anxiety and fear she felt when she saw Audrey looking at a duplicate paper. This was the point at which he, having already got a general idea of the whole story just before, began to listen again to the fuller details. Audrey had looked at her paper, had thought of him, and been true to the very last.

“Go on, Polly,” said he impatiently. “Never

mind what you felt; let me know what you did. You say you changed those two papers; tell me how."

Then she told him how she had watched and waited, and stolen the pocket-book, and learnt that what she most dreaded was true, and that in her blind distress she must have made the mistake then; that she did it quite accidentally, and after that never again looked inside her locket. But when she got so far, she dared no longer raise her eyes to Brian's face; it was so angry, and to her so terrible.

"Do you know," said he, "what you have done? Miss Wentworth was to have been my wife. She knew I loved her, though I was held back by promises from telling her all. We divided a sheet of paper between us, and she was to send me her half if ever she thought of marrying any one else; she promised me that faithfully, and if she had but sent me the right paper she never would have married Copeland, and I——Well, it is you, Polly, who destroyed all the good of our plan! You changed the papers, and when I got the one with my own name on it in an envelope ad-

dressed by you, I only thought you had for some silly reason sent me back the paper in your own locket; I threw it in the fire and thought no more about it, and she of course believed then that I did not care what she did. Now, then, tell me how you happened to direct the letter which I did get?"

"Oh! wait, Brian," cried Polly piteously; "I will tell you all—but did you love her so very much?" One look in his face answered that question. She flung herself down on the floor at his feet, she hid her face against his knees, and sobbed as if her heart would break. "But, Brian," said she after a while, once more pleading with him, "even if you had got the right paper, what could you have done? She only sent it three weeks before her wedding—you could have done nothing then."

Something in Polly's voice or manner irritated him, and he said, "How long did it take to persuade you to come away with me? Do you think, if I had begged and prayed with all my strength, as I should have done, that she would have resisted me? No, she

would have married me. She would not have sent the paper back to me at all unless she had meant to give me a chance."

Polly's agony was terrible, and he did not seem to notice it. All his thoughts were given to Audrey.

"She might just have sent it from a feeling of honour, because she promised. She could hardly break off with Mr. Copeland then."

"What do you know about honour?" cried Brian angrily. He could not bear to hear Polly speak of Audrey's thoughts or feelings. He could not forgive her for having been the means of deceiving him, however innocently.

"You are cruel, Brian!" said Polly; "but, say what you like, I deserve it all, for she is dead. I know she is; and I am one of those who helped to kill her!" And on this she broke out into another paroxysm of grief.

Her suffering did affect him now, and he tried to soothe her, and said he forgave her for what she had done, and told her he knew it had all happened accidentally, and what was done could not be undone; and that, though he was angry and very much shocked, she must

not think he did not love her, and that she was foolish to think Miss Wentworth was dead, for he knew she was not. He had guessed where she was. And so, little by little, Polly began to see hope of being forgiven and restored to the happiness of being loved by him, and he was glad that she was somewhat tranquillized. But, for his own part, he sat in a stony state of powerless despair, for fate itself had worked against him in this—human hands had only accidentally lent themselves to carrying out the decrees of destiny, which had resolved that he and Audrey should be parted. And such a trifling act had done it.

Unhappily for himself and Polly, after a while he remembered he had had no answer from her to that question of his—How it happened that the address on the letter containing the changeling indenture had been in her handwriting? And he insisted upon knowing, and Polly became confused, and contradicted herself in trying to tell him the truth and yet keep back all that would make him angry again; and the end was, she was

obliged to tell him all and everything, and he learnt that he had been tricked out of the possession of the woman he most loved by a course of treachery, and that this poor girl at his feet had been one of the chief agents in the ruin of his happiness. A short time before he had, in his pity for her, taken her hand and held it clasped in his. Now he put it from him. An angel could not patiently have borne to hear what he had heard; but he tried to avoid reproaches. Only, when he named Dudley, there was no limit to his rage and anger.

Polly had spoken of the passionate grief of Audrey on that last day, when she learnt how she had been deceived; and Brian was silent, thinking of that poor pale face and those sad eyes until tears well-nigh stood in his own. He was doing his very best to restrain himself and remember that Polly was a woman, and ought not to be too harshly dealt with, and that all she had done had been done for love of him. But it was hard to bear the sight of her now that he knew all, and perfectly impossible to forget Audrey,

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and her wrongs, and her sufferings, and that he had lost her for ever.

“Was she so very unhappy?” he asked, though he found what he did know about her already almost unbearable.

“I dare say she was. She was not the only one!”

“And you let her go on being unhappy, when a word from you would have made all right? You helped to steal her letters, and to conceal from her that I had been to see her? God forgive you, Polly! I shall find it difficult to do so.”

Polly was silent. He thought from hardness, and continued—“It would be no use for me to pretend that I can feel quite the same to you as I did.”

Polly was silent with the silence of despair. He had no pity for her, never once thought of her, only of Audrey. “I wish I had been born a lady,” said she bitterly, thinking that might have made a difference in his way of treating her.

“Ladies don’t steal letters and read them; ladies speak the truth,” said he.

A convulsive shudder was Polly's only answer; and neither spoke for some time.

"If she has done anything bad to herself," said he, "the guilt of her death will lie at your door."

Polly slowly raised her eyes to his face, and he was shocked when he saw them, and how full of suffering they looked. She opened her lips—her blue, wan lips—to say, "Do I not know it? No one need remind me of that, for I know it only too well."

Then he was silent, and sorry for Polly also, but too strangely cold to her to be able to show it.

"I feel what you think of me, Brian," said she, speaking slowly and with great effort, "but at any rate I loved you. That must be some excuse for my coming away with you as I did. You reproached me about it just now. But you, it seems, never loved me. Nothing can excuse your having let me come if you did not love me."

"I did love you. I have always loved you! But I can tell you it would take a great deal of love to make me overlook what you have

just owned to. Polly, I do mean to try to forgive you, but it won't be easy. I am going out now."

And away he went to the barracks as usual. And some of the officers asked him to go to Bastia with them for a couple of days, for some fête going on there; and he consented gladly, for he wanted to get out of the way: he felt he could not be quite the same to Polly for some time yet.

They were going at once. They drove him down to the hotel, and waited while he ran in to put the few things which he wanted in his bag.

Polly was lying on the sofa, pale, and as it were half unconscious after all she had undergone. She looked up as she saw him getting his things together, and feared he was going to leave her for ever, but dared not speak.

"I am going to Bastia for two days," said he.

"You—you are not leaving me altogether?" said she.

"No. I return in two days. Of course I am not leaving you," he added, seeing the expression of intense anxiety in her face.

“Brian, could you say you forgive me before you go?” she asked.

“I for—give you! Yes, I think I can say that,” said he, doing some violence to his feelings—her condition touched him so. “But if you knew the shock it has been to me to hear this of you, you would not wonder at my wanting to get away by myself for a day or so, till I can be as I used to be again. Good-bye, Polly. You are pretty comfortable? Are you sure there is nothing you want?” He was very uneasy at leaving her thus.

She looked in his face drearily and hopelessly. He knew she was longing for a kiss. He did not feel as if he could kiss her, and yet he did not quite like to go away without doing so.

“I will put a rug over your feet, and then you will feel warmer, and perhaps sleep.”

Her feet were warm enough; it was her heart which was frozen for want of a word of kindness. He put the rug over her, and then said, “I shall be back in two days, and when I come back I mean to utter no word of reproach. I am partly going away now to

enable me to be the same with you when I come back. Now, Polly, good-bye. I want to part kindly, but it is not in human nature not to feel terribly hurt at what you have done. Good-bye ! ” And yet he stood a minute or two.

Polly covered her forehead and eyes with her hands ; her head ached with illness, her heart with grief and pain. When she removed her hand soon after, she found he was gone.

CHAPTER XII.

“Though justice be thy plea, consider this,—
That in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.”

MERCHANT OF VENICE.

DUDLEY WENTWORTH was slowly recovering, though hardly out of danger yet, and George was constant in his attendance on him. It was a thankless office, for never again could those two men get beyond the state of the merest toleration of each other's presence. George despised Dudley most heartily. Dudley knew it, and could not stand up against this knowledge, and the consciousness that George was aware how deeply he had fallen. George longed to get back to England, but his humanity forbade him to leave the sick

man alone in a strange and semi-barbarous country, under the care of people who could hardly understand a word that he said, and an ignorant foreign doctor who would probably bleed him to death in less than a week if his protector left him. But it is a mighty poor thing to be served from mere humanity, and Dudley felt that was all he need look for from George.

“I wish you would leave me,” he often said; “I know you want to go home, and I shall do very well now.”

But George’s very desire to get away from him made him the more careful to do his entire duty, and stay till all danger was over.

It was the beginning of February now, and Dudley had been lying dangerously ill for more than a fortnight. George had written home more than once, but the postal arrangements were disorganized by the snow. The letters went round by Bastia and Italy; they did not “march” at all on the Ajaccio side, and he never exactly knew if his had been received. Those which came to him continued to tell

him that Audrey was still undiscovered. It was a cruel stroke of fortune to keep him away from the search for her, by compelling him to remain with the man who had brought all their troubles on them.

George was in Dudley's room one morning, when a tap was heard at the door, and opening it he saw Miss Vaughan.

"Excuse me," said she, taking him to a window in the lobby to be out of Dudley's hearing. "You and I are the only English people here in Corte who are able to do anything; I want your advice and help."

George hardly knew Miss Vaughan; at the very most they had a bowing acquaintance, prosecuted on the stairs; but he naturally signified his readiness to be useful.

"A young English woman is lying here very ill; she has a fever, and there is no one to look after her but myself. She says she knows you a little. Will you tell me what I had better do? She is really very ill, and she does not speak a word of French or Italian, which seems a very strange thing to me; and her husband, who ought to be with

her, has gone away on some expedition or other, and cannot be found."

"Is it Mrs. Templemore?" inquired George.

He had been so shut up in Dudley's sick-room that he knew none of the news of the hotel.

"Yes, she says that is her name," replied Miss Vaughan doubtfully. "Mr. Templemore went for a two days' visit to Bastia with some officers, and now he has been away nearly a week. She was taken ill the day after he went. I sent the landlord to the barracks to try to find out where he was, but one of the officers who came back at the proper time said that he thought Mr. Templemore meant to go on some shooting excursion to some other place. He ought to have written to her. It is really very awkward, Mr. Copeland, especially for me, for the roads are now open to Ajaccio, and I want to go. It is most inconvenient for me to stay here when I don't want to do it, and yet I can hardly go away and leave her with no one to look after her. What shall I do?"

"I think," replied George, "that if she is

as ill as you say, it would hardly do to leave her quite alone. Would your staying here cause you much inconvenience?"

"Oh no—I could stay."

"Then it would be a great kindness to her to do so. If she speaks no French or Italian, she would be absolutely helpless without you. Could you stay till she was a little better?"

"Well," said Miss Vaughan, "I could, of course; but, Mr. Copeland, I don't the least believe she is married!"

"Oh yes, she is," cried George.

"No, she is not. I found it out last night. I suspected something wrong the moment I discovered she knew no French; but I found it out for certain last night, and I must say it makes me feel very much disinclined to stay. It is not at all pleasant to have anything to do with people of that kind."

George stood in wonder. To him a sick woman was a sick woman, and therefore an object of compassion; married or unmarried, she came equally within the scope of his kindness if she needed it.

"Can I see her?" he asked abruptly.

“She told me she was married, and I don’t see why she should not have spoken the truth. But if she is as ill as you say, we need not think about that now; married or unmarried, she has an equal right to our help.”

“Ah! you are a man,” said Miss Vaughan. “Men can hold any queer opinions they like, and are no worse off for it.”

George hurried her away to Polly’s room. There, on her bed, she lay, looking thin and worn; but her colour was bright with fever, and never had he seen her look so beautiful.

“I have brought Mr. Copeland to see you. You did not exactly say you wished to see him, but I thought it was better in every way that you should do so. It is a great responsibility for me—great—and I don’t like it.” These last words were vaguely addressed to the room at large, and uttered in a very discontented voice. Since she had gathered from Polly’s delirious ravings that she was not married, and therefore very unhappy, Miss Vaughan’s manner had much changed, and most of the kindness had died out of it.

A fleeting look of joy came into the sick

girl's eyes as they had the comfort of resting on George's face, for her trust in him was perfect.

"Thank you!" said she. "I did not like to send for you. I longed to do so, but was so afraid; I thought perhaps you might not care to come."

"You must not talk much; it is not good for you," said Miss Vaughan, melting a little when she saw the effort which it cost Polly to say this.

"Nothing but talking will do me any good now," said Polly mournfully. "I must say a few words to Mr. Copeland. Will you leave me alone with him a minute, please? I must speak with him alone."

"Oh, I can leave you alone, of course," said Miss Vaughan. "If you have anything to say to this gentleman which you do not wish me to hear, I had better be no hindrance."

Polly looked regretfully at Miss Vaughan, pained by her doubting looks and words.

"Mr. Copeland is an old friend of mine," said she, "if I dare venture to call him so. I only know he has been kinder to me than any one else."

George went into the next room with Miss Vaughan, and placed a chair for her by the fire. This room was so large that, sitting there, she could hear nothing, though the door of the bedroom was open. Dearly she wished she could hear something when she saw the expression in Mr. Copeland's face as the *soi-disant* Mrs. Templemore stooped forward and said to him—

“Mr. Copeland, I can neither rest night nor day for thinking of her. Is she found? Have you heard from Dorminster?”

A change came over George's face at this question and the thoughts it brought with it. Polly saw it, and was conscious that for her sake he tried to control himself and answer hopefully, though his heart was almost breaking.

“I have heard, but she is not found. Every search is being made. Don't look so anxious. I have hope yet. In case of anything bad she would have been found.”

“She will never be found—never—and I was one of those who killed her! How ill you look, Mr. Copeland! And that is my doing too.”

Polly began to cry, but was too weak to do more than shed some bitter, heartfelt tears.

“It is true, Mr. George, what I say—but I am dying. I am punished!”

George looked earnestly at her, half afraid her words were prophetic.

“Yes, I am dying,—and he is not here.”

George took her hand and felt her pulse.

“You are ill, Polly, but there is nothing to prevent your getting well again. Don’t fret. Don’t believe the worst so easily.”

“Unless she is found I don’t want to get well.”

“Wait a moment,” said he; “I will run upstairs and get some medicine I want to give you. After that you will feel better.”

He gave her the medicine; he tried to reassure her, but in vain, and she began to talk in a very excited manner.

“Mr. George, I knew I should die from the very first day I was really ill. When people try to take their lives and are saved, it is likely enough that God will give them some punishment for it before He is done with

them, and I am getting mine now. I want to live till I see Mr. Templemore again—that is all. He will fret so if I die while he is away!” She was silent a minute, then she added, “If I die while he is away—if I don’t live till he comes back, please tell him from me that I did not a bit blame him for going. I felt I deserved all he said and did, and a great deal more; and it was not his going away made me ill, it was the fever I caught from the landlord’s son. Tell him that, and that he is not to be unhappy afterwards about not being with me when I was ill, for I was well attended to. Tell him I quite understood why he went; that it was because he wanted to clear his mind of all the anger he could not help feeling against me, and then he would come back and treat me as if nothing had happened. That was his meaning, I know; but this illness has made all go wrong, for if I die before he gets back, he will be sure to feel as if he ought not to have been away.”

“You are sure he will come back?” said George, emboldened to make this inquiry by her strong confidence in his return.

“Absolutely sure—but sadly afraid that he will come too late. If he does, will—will you, Mr. Copeland, tell him all I am saying now?”

She stopped, for she saw a look of reluctance in George’s face — and truly he did dislike the idea of being brought in contact with a man who had had such an evil influence on his own fortunes.

“Oh! Mr. George, do promise me you will. I cannot die happily if I think he is likely to be miserable on my account. He was quite right to go, and I want him to know I thought so, but I can’t leave any message with any one but you—the people here don’t understand what I say, and Miss Vaughan will take no message from me to him, for she has found out we are not married.”

“I thought you were married,” said George regretfully.

“No, God help me! I am not, and I dare say you think me a very wicked girl, and so I am, no doubt; though perhaps the wickedest thing about me is that I can’t bring myself to see that I have been so wrong in coming

away with Brian as I did. You see, I loved him so. I had loved him all my life."

George attempted to speak, but she stopped him.

"Wait; I know you are going to talk seriously to me—but wait till I have said something I am afraid of forgetting. When he comes back here after I am dead don't tell him I owned I was not married. He will think, perhaps, that I felt that very much, and that it helped to make me ill and unhappy. It does rather, but he must never know it. Just let him think I had nothing of that kind on my mind at all."

"I promise," said George. "I will do everything you wish; but if you only take care of yourself you will get well, I hope, and then you can say all these things yourself."

She shook her head.

"I am going to leave you now," said he. "You have talked too much already. Don't say another word. Listen to me. I am going now to the barracks, and I will make careful inquiries about Mr. Templemore there. If I can hear where he is, I will send for him.

In any case, I will send a man off by the next diligence in an hour's time to Bastia. You will soon have him back with you. Don't thank me. Don't speak again."

"Just one word. I want to confess to you all I did when I was staying in Flower Gate. I don't believe he," and she indicated Dudley by a wave of the hand in the direction of the top of the house, "would ever tell you half the truth. I might die, and you would never know. You must stay. Sit down, and let me tell you all; I'll make it short."

George sat down. She spoke, and he listened; and Miss Vaughan strained her ears to catch something to explain what she saw. For George heard things he had never heard before, and now, piece by piece, he was able to make out every portion of Audrey's betrayal. His head burned, his heart swelled with anger; and many a sign of it escaped him, and puzzled and astonished Miss Vaughan in her distant post of observation. Polly was looking straight before her as she spoke, and saw nothing; but when she did look at him, the change in his face was startling.

“Now, Mr. Copeland, now you know why I don’t care to live unless she is found.”

“Don’t say another word!” said he vehemently. “Let the past alone. Try to get well; try to live to make amends. I am going now. I will come and give you some more of that medicine in four hours’ time.”

“Oh! Mr. Copeland, then you won’t desert me? You will come again? You can still bear to see me?”

“I intend to help to nurse you,” said George. “You must try to sleep now. I am going to inquire for Templemore.”

Polly’s face glowed with admiration and gratitude. The confession she had made had relieved her; George’s promise to help her strengthened her. He went out of the room and closed the door carefully behind him. He saw that Polly, exhausted by the excitement of talking, would soon sleep. He crossed the room to Miss Vaughan, who advanced stiffly to meet him. Her bearing was frigid, her words icily polite.

“I think, Mr. Copeland, you won’t be surprised to hear me say that I decline to resume

my attendance on that person in the next room. From all I have seen during your conversation—words, of course, I have not heard—but from what I have seen of your most intimate way of speaking, I feel that it would be infinitely better for you to provide other attendance. You and she seem thoroughly in each other's confidence. She never talks so to me. Good morning to you, sir."

George was a quick-tempered man, and now he spoke with some warmth.

"My acquaintance with her consists in having saved her life once, and I mean to do my best to try to save it again. Will you, madam, help me to nurse her?"

"I will not help you to nurse her! You ought to be ashamed of yourself to ask such a thing!"

And so saying, she swept out of the room, raising her dress as she went, and taking as much care to shield her perishable garments from defilement by the dust of the floor of the Templemores' drawing-room, as her soul from defilement by contact with the unfortunate

Polly. She ordered her carriage, packed her things, and rolled away swiftly to Ajaccio.

And George went and saw the landlady, who, melted by his entreaties, went herself to take a seat by the bedside of the poor sick girl when she awoke. And she continued to do so, and by signs they communicated with each other when George was not there to help them. His first care was to send messengers after Brian. One officer said he was at Calvi, another at Asco. He sent men to both places.

He gave Polly her medicine, he looked after Dudley, and he and the landlady sat all night with Polly. Sometimes she slept, at others she moaned in delirium. By daylight she was calm and wakeful, and then he talked earnestly with her. What he said changed the aspect of much in this world and the next to her; and after two days of his nursing she blessed him for the comfort and hope he had given her, and was not afraid to die.

On the evening of that second day there was an arrival at the hotel, and George was

sent for by a lady who had just come. It was Miss Templemore.

“I have come, Mr. Copeland, to help you. I was staying at Vivario when that Miss Vaughan you have had here came in to get some luncheon, and she told me all you were doing. What a fool that woman is! I ought to know, for she is an old acquaintance of mine. She says you are nursing Dudley Wentworth, and at the same time looking after that poor girl my precious nephew has run away with. I have come to take either the one or the other off your hands. Which you like—it is the same to me. Miss Vaughan says she does not believe Brian has married the girl, and therefore she could not stay with her. If she felt her character could not take care of itself, she was right to go. Mine can. Don’t let us waste time in talking; the long and the short is, I have come to nurse whichever of the two invalids you like to resign to me.”

“Take Dudley, then,” said George, with a thrill of delight at the idea of getting rid

of the sight of him. "Take him, and the landlady and I will nurse poor Polly."

"But would it not be better for me, as a woman, to be with her?"

"No," said George; "I cannot leave her, for she is dying."

CHAPTER XIII.

“Cover her face, she died young.”

DUCHESS OF MALFY.

“It’s I will kiss your bonny cheek,
And I will kiss your chin,
And I will kiss your clay-cauld lip
But I’ll ne’er kiss woman again.”

BRIAN TEMPLEMORE had been at Bastia, and then had gone on to Calvi and some places near; but no excitement of play by night, or sport by day, had been sufficient to keep his troubles away from him. He had lost Audrey and perfect happiness through his own carelessness and other people’s misconduct. He had behaved ill to her. Was he to be harsh and cruel and unforgiving to another girl, who had returned his boyish love only too well, and whose wrong-doing, the very acts on account of which he had parted

from her in anger, had arisen from the intensity of her love for him ?

It was impossible for him to keep up anger against Polly ; a hundred gentle and loving deeds rose up to plead her cause if ever he attempted to do so. No one had ever been so dependent on him as she was, and he had left her without even one kiss.

Why should he not marry her ? She was very charming and devoted to him. Even his father had once allowed that it was only what he ought to do. Could not he, wretched as he now was, find some degree of happiness in making reparation to Polly, and trying to expiate his sins to both girls by his kindness to one ? How happy the very idea of this would make her ! And he would do it ; and as for the world, if his father could overlook all faults, he cared for nothing else. Poor thing ! How her eyes would brighten at his return !

He set off at once to go back to Corte. He knew nothing of Polly's illness ; he had been in quite a different direction to that which George's messenger had taken, stay-

ing in the country house of the father of one of the officers. Now he and this friend took a carriage and drove as fast as they could to Corte, Brian all the way picturing to himself Polly's pleasure at his return. He had been just eight days away ; he would never leave her so again. He had written to her once, but he had not named the day when he would go back to her. All the more delight for her when she saw him, and for him too, for he owned he loved her very much. The officer jumped out at the foot of the hill leading to the barracks. Brian drove on to the hotel, and arrived there about seven in the evening.

Several people belonging to the hotel were in the doorway as he entered, and in the eyes of these there was an expression which struck him as strange.

“ Madame Templemore va bien ? ” he said, more as a friendly greeting than because he feared the contrary.

But he had stumbled on a *patois*-speaking group of servants, and received no answer. The landlady was coming downstairs with a

lighted taper in her hand, and a look in her face as she exclaimed, "Dieu soit loué, monsieur, vous arrivez !" which made him feel as if something very bad had happened. He asked how Polly was. She shook her head and prepared to speak, but he ran past her and upstairs, and through the large deserted sitting-room to the door of the bed-room, where lights were burning. Polly was in bed, ill, worn, her eyes larger and brighter than ever, her cheeks burning with the fever which was eating her life away. Miss Templemore, his aunt, was moistening her lips with a feather ; George Copeland was kneeling by her bedside reading the prayers for the dying. She had put one of her hands in his in her loving gratitude to him, and her eyes were fixed on him as she eagerly listened to every word which he said.

For a moment no one saw Brian, but in his grief he reeled against the door and caught hold of it. Polly was the only one who heard the sound he thus made. She looked up and saw him ; but she had so often pictured his return and the manner of it, and how he

would stand in the doorway just as he was standing now, and look in her face just as he was looking now, that when he really did stand there she only regarded his appearance as one vision the more, and smiled as she had often ere this smiled at empty space because she thought it filled with his image ; but when he moved and came nearer, and she saw that he really was there, her joy knew no bounds—no bounds but weakness, for she could only gasp, “Oh, Brian, you! Oh, thank God, you!”

He came in. George rose and gently placed the hand which he had been holding in Brian’s, and silently gave him a chair.

“She is very weak,” said he; “but, thank God! you are in time.”

“But—but what is it?” gasped Brian.

“Fever,” said George. “She has been ill ever since you left.”

Then he went out, and Miss Templemore followed. The two were left alone.

“My Brian!” she said in a low voice, as he kissed her poor parched lips, “I knew all the time you loved me!”

Brian felt faint with the suddenness of this shock. He kissed her again and again, exclaiming—

“Love you, my darling! I should think so!”

Then he stood back a little way from the bed to look at her, and see what was the most he might count on—the worst he need dread. His loving words and the sight of him had restored her for a moment. She made him a sign to sit down near her, and then laid her face caressingly against his shoulder, with a happy smile on her lips.

“I am not afraid to die, Brian,” said she gently; “it is only leaving you is so hard.”

“Die!” said he in dismay. He could not bear to have his most cruel fears thus put into shape. “Don’t speak of such a thing. Now I am here you will get better.”

“I will try,” said she in a very faint voice, “but I am afraid it will have to be.”

Her head was on his arm now, her fiery cheek against his. The pulses of both beat fast.

“My dear Polly,” said he, “let me tell you why I was so long in coming. It was not that I was angry with you—I forgave you the first day—but I was kept longer than I wanted to stay, and I never knew that you were ill. You got my letter?”

“No, Brian, I got no letter.”

“Oh, Polly!—but you knew that I loved you all the time, did not you?”

“I did; at least I hoped it.”

“I love you far more than you know. I was thinking of you all the time I was away, and planning how we would get married directly, and go home and live close by my father; and so we will as soon as ever you are well. We will, Polly, won’t we?”

She had no hope, but she smiled in quiet happiness, his words pleased her so.

“Say yes, Polly. Say you will marry me as soon as you are well.”

“Ah! Brian,” said she, “we ought to have been married before; we ought never to have come away as we did. We have been very wicked. I know that now. Talk to Mr. Copeland, Brian; you don’t know how good

he is, and how kind he has been to me. He has talked to me and read to me, and made me not afraid to die."

"Polly, darling, don't talk that way! You must stay with me."

She shook her head.

"Let me say a few words, and then you must let me go to sleep. Brian, never forget that this life is not the end of all, and that there is something far nobler to do in it than just please ourselves. Mr. Copeland made me see that. I have been very wicked, Brian; if God would only let me live a little longer, I would try——"

"I am the one who has been wicked," said Brian—"not you. My life has all been spent in selfishness. But I will be so different. We will go back to my father as soon as we are married, and do our best to make him happy. Now, Polly, rest awhile, and then I am sure you will be better when you awake—quite sure."

George now came with Polly's medicine. He gave it to her gently, without moving her head from Brian's arm. Polly smiled in his

face; her smile was happy, but she looked very, very weary.

“You must really let her rest now,” said George. “She must not talk any more. She will sleep if you leave her quiet. I have been up with her the last three nights, and so I know exactly what she wants.”

“Mr. Copeland,” said she, “please say that prayer you said last night—it sends me off to sleep so happy.”

George knelt down and repeated the prayer she wished for.

“Copeland,” said Brian, much affected, “as long as I live I shall never cease to be grateful to you for your kindness to my dear wife.”

That word wife was the last poor Polly heard. Her eyes had already closed in weariness and were too tired to reopen, but a heavenly smile passed over her lips, and faded slowly away as sleep made its own of her. In a few minutes she was unconscious.

“Would you like me near you to-night? I can stay in the next room if you like,” said George.

“Please do,” whispered Brian. “I am so little accustomed to nursing any one, and so very anxious.”

“Won’t you move your chair a little back from the bed? It is hardly safe for you to be so near.”

Brian shook his head and stayed where he was. Once or twice George looked into the room. Polly was still sleeping. He saw that Templemore was sitting by the bedside, and that slow, painfully formed tears rose to his eyes as he watched her, and his fears became too strong for him. Then George retreated.

With his own sad thoughts for company, Brian might be, and was, most miserable; but Polly’s head was lying close up against his shoulder,—her hand was lying locked in his. But who, thought George, had soothed the agony of his own dear Audrey? If she were dead, the bitter passage had been traversed alone. Not one grasp of her hand, not one glance of her eyes, had been vouchsafed to him. She had been caught away as completely as the prophet of old, and he had no

legacy but a life-long regret for the share he had had in what she had suffered.

Towards morning Polly's breathing grew more painful, irregular, and loud. She spoke and started convulsively in her sleep.

"She is worse," said Brian. "Can we do nothing for her?"

"It will go off," said George. "She has breathed that way every night. It gets well by daybreak."

By daybreak, when the meagre grey light made all chill and ghastly, and the pale faces of the watchers looked haggard and spectral, she did breathe more quietly—but she never awoke again.

CHAPTER XIV.

“O, shut the door! and when thou hast done so,
Come weep with me; past hope, past cure, past help!”

ROMEO AND JULIET.

“Thou sure and firm set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
The very stones prate of my whereabout.”

MACBETH.

WHEN Audrey Wentworth received, on that 18th December, such convincing proofs that those dearest to her were false, and that she and Brian were the victims of a shameful conspiracy, her first and only wish was to fly to some remote part of the earth, where she would never again see any of those who had deceived her. The very thought of looking into Dudley's treacherous face was hateful to her—never again could she endure the sight of it. He had smiled and looked anxious and

full of pity and love, while all the time he was causing the misery which he pretended to compassionate, and George had helped him ! She repeated this to herself as she buttoned her dress, put on her bonnet, and wrapped a shawl around herself. The moment she was really ready she meant to go. She did not know where—anywhere, provided it was far from all chance of ever seeing either of them again. When ready, without one thought of hesitation, she opened her door gently and stole downstairs, hearing their false voices, their laughter, with the merry ring because of their own success in evil-doing, as she tremblingly passed the drawing-room door.

It was raining heavily, and the street was as empty as if it had been cleared on purpose to screen her flight ; but, peeping for better security through the dining-room blind, she saw the Copelands' coachman impatiently watching the door, and two or three children sheltering under the doorway, waiting to see the bride come out and depart. There was not a vestige of a chance of flight for her by that way. She went to the back of the house. The

back door opened into their own garden, and then there was another door into a lane ; but when she got to that second door, she heard voices, and knew that other persons were sheltering there also. Everything was against her ! The rain was very heavy, and there was no likelihood of these people moving away while it lasted. But on looking up to the sky, she saw that the weather was clearing rapidly, and that in a very short time the sun, which was already half bursting forth from behind a heavy rain-cloud, would be shining brightly, and the shower be over.

She crept back into the house. She dared not stay downstairs where she was, lest some of her enemies should come and capture her. She must return to her own room, and once more encounter the perils of a descent when it was fair. If once those people were gone and she could get out, a rapid walk would soon take her beyond reach of pursuit. As she went in, she shut the door much more noisily than she intended—that was the “clash” which Bridget afterwards remembered. Baffled for the present, and nervous about her chances

for the future, she crept upstairs and went to her window, and looked over at some distant hills which lay behind the cathedral. They were crowned with trees which would have served to shelter her if only she could have got to them unnoticed. Suddenly, as if by inspiration, a thought came to her—a heaven-sent thought, which she would obey as such. Once, some time ago, when at Miss Newcomen's, she had, partly for fun, opened that lady's window, shut it from the outside, and crept along the balcony to her own room, just for the sake of trying how it felt to enter her own home by the window instead of the door. She opened her window at once now, noiselessly and gently; waited a while, in order that the coachman, if he had heard any sound and looked up, might have time to arrive at the conclusion that the noise, whatever it was, was of no importance, and turn his head away again before she got out into the balcony; then she stole out, slowly and carefully, shut the window behind her, and, bending low, but sheltered all the while by the heavy pilasters of the balcony, crept along

till she reached the window where Miss Newcomen was sitting working, and happily alone.

That lady had been for some time listening to the pawing and prancing horses in the carriage waiting below for her little friend Audrey, and thinking with regret of the long time during which she had had to be content with letters instead of visits from her, when suddenly she saw the bride herself standing outside in her travelling dress. She was evidently, as Miss Newcomen thought, quite ready to go, but unable, after all, to leave Dorminster without one word of farewell. At least, that was how she accounted for this visit. Her face brightened with joy, and she stretched out her hand to ring the bell to bring a servant to open the window. But Audrey was too quick for her, and opened it herself, and, stooping low, came in. But when Miss Newcomen heard her story, when she found her gentle, patient little Audrey changed into a vindictive, self-reliant woman, her pleasure turned into dismay and astonishment.

“Let me stay here till night—for God’s sake! hide me till night,” was Audrey’s one

prayer ; and her face would have moved the hardest heart to pity. "Let me get the key and open that locked room," she urged. "Let me stay there till it is dark."

In vain Miss Newcomen entreated her to go back home. Audrey became frantic if such a thing were even so much as named.

"If George came here," said she, afraid Miss Newcomen might propose to send for him or for her brother, "if I saw Dudley now, I should kill myself. I would rather do that than have to go back to them. You can send for them if you like, but I warn you they won't get me back really—at least, not to keep me. You will make something happen!"

Audrey was so excited, so different in manner from her usual self, that Miss Newcomen was quite alarmed.

"And if I hide you till night, what will you do then?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Go away as far from Dorminster as possible, and never let either of them know what has become of me. Cruel! Wrong!" cried she, hearing some words of Miss Newcomen's. "What have

they been? Could any people have been more wicked and cruel? I hate and despise them! Do you think I would live with either of them? And I did so love them both! They were so much to me." And she burst into tears.

In vain Miss Newcomen tried to soothe her. Nothing but yielding to her wishes could do anything towards that.

"I see you won't help me!" said Audrey drearily. "And what am I to do?"

"Yes, I will," said the poor old lady, thinking anything better than to drive her to desperation.

"Will you let me hide in that room till night?"

"Yes."

"But will you promise to tell no one where I am, or that you have seen me, but to keep me safely till it is quite dark, and then let me steal away?"

"Where to?" inquired Miss Newcomen anxiously.

"Oh, somewhere; I don't know yet. If I walked all night, no one would see me, and

I should be a long way out of their reach by morning. Besides, when morning came I could still walk on. If I once got ten miles away no one would know me, and I need not hide. You see, my world has always been made up of four or five people only. Very few would know me."

Audrey talked all this time with almost unintelligible volubility; she was well-nigh beside herself with excitement.

"Poor darling child!" said Miss Newcomen, full of the deepest pity, "you must go into that room now, if you don't want to be seen, for when the servants have finished their dinner my Sophy is sure to come to see if I want anything. Wrap yourself up in your shawl. Stay—there is one of mine in my bedroom; get that too. And very soon I will order a cup of tea, and you shall have it. Lie down now, and when night comes we will talk."

"But you promise not to tell them where I am in the mean time? You won't betray me? I dare say they will look for me. You see, they value me at seventy or eighty

thousand pounds. If they come here, what will you say?"

"Did any one see you come along the balcony?"

"No."

"Then they won't think of coming here to ask about you."

"Miss Newcomen," cried Audrey, "unless you will tell a falsehood for me, I had better go at once."

"Dear child, calm yourself; no one is likely to ask me any questions."

"But you *would* tell a falsehood for me?" said Audrey, who clung to this point with the tenacity of one whose brain has received a shock.

"Again I tell you that no one will dream of your being here."

"Ah!" said Audrey, "then you wouldn't tell a falsehood for me."

"Call it a lie, Audrey, at once, and be assured that I will tell one without hesitation."

Alas! poor lady, that itself was untrue; but she saw such a dangerous look in Audrey's eyes that she partly justified her words to her own conscience.

Audrey was hid in the inner room, and lay on that disused sofa, wrapped in warm shawls and furs, and after some lonely, strange hours, she slept. Had she been awake she might have heard Miss Newcomen's maid recounting to her mistress the miseries and calamities which had befallen No. 4; but she was in a kind of stupor, and lay till night, when, Miss Newcomen having finally dismissed her Sophy, she came out.

Miss Newcomen had often been remonstrated with by her friends for bolting her bed-room and sitting-room doors at night, but it was a habit of hers, and she could not give it up; and now she felt the comfort of it, for Audrey could come out and sit with her with perfect safety. The way Miss Newcomen always arranged was this. Sophy locked the sitting-room door, then helped her mistress into her bed-room, undressed her, and retreated. Miss Newcomen then bolted the bed-room door, and no one was able to come in till she chose to withdraw the bolt. This she could do from her bed. She had been so long an invalid that every arrangement was

made thus, with a view to her own liking and comfort.

As it grew late, Audrey began to talk of going, and Miss Newcomen became more and more anxious, for where was this delicate and unfriended girl to go? And Audrey's manner was so excited, and her whole nature so changed, that Miss Newcomen resolved to betray her to Dudley rather than let her face the dangers of darkness and solitude, and the strong temptation to commit suicide. She was sure if she could only keep her for a few days her mind would recover its balance, and she would consent to be reconciled with her family; but even charitable Miss Newcomen felt that the child had wrongs to complain of, which well-nigh justified her in withdrawing herself for ever from those who had so cruelly inflicted them.

“Stay with me, Audrey; you can live in that room, and no one will ever guess you are there. Do, darling. I should break my heart if I knew you were struggling by yourself with every kind of trouble. Have pity on me, Audrey; it makes me so ill to be anxious.

And how can you go out by night—you, who have been kept safe and warm in one room for so many weeks now?"

Audrey shook her head. She would not stay; and yet, compared with the difficulties which she would have to encounter the moment she crossed that threshold, life with Miss Newcomen seemed a very paradise of safety. Again and again the poor old lady entreated her to stay.

"You would end by telling them I was here," replied Audrey at last, somewhat shaken. "No, I cannot stay; I thank you, but don't ask me any more."

"Have you any money?"

"A few shillings."

This answer redoubled Miss Newcomen's uneasiness. A child like that going to face the world with a few shillings! If that was the spirit in which she was setting out, she herself was ready to promise anything, connive at anything, which would keep Audrey safe and well, and under the shelter of her own roof.

"Stay here," cried she earnestly; "I will

do anything—I will promise anything you like if you will only stay.”

“Would you promise never to show the smallest knowledge of where I was ; never to let my brother—I don’t mean ever to call him by his Christian name again—have the least idea of anything which has happened ? ”

Even now it cost Miss Newcomen a struggle to make that promise ; but Audrey’s very life hung in the balance, and she said, “ I would.”

“ And if I were to say that I would not stay, you would still promise ? ”

“ No, I would not ; if I were to find that you were obstinate about going, I believe it would be my duty to send for your brother.”

“ Then you leave me no alternative ? ”

“ I don’t want to leave you an alternative. I am a poor old invalid, and I love you ; and you would make me happy if you would stay—and you shall stay. Come, Audrey, that room is at your service, and I will promise all you wish.”

“ Nay, you must swear.”

“ I swear, so help me God, I won’t let any one know where you are.”

“Then,” said Audrey, “if you can bear the sight of a wretched girl who has lost faith in everybody but you, I will stay a few days, and with thankfulness; but if I want to go then, you must not prevent me.”

“How could you go?” asked Miss Newcomen. “By day you would be seen, and by night all our doors are locked, and my servants take the keys up to bed with them.”

“Oh, I have thought of that. I would wait till quite late—till one o’clock—and then I would leave this house as I came, get in at my own window, and go quietly downstairs and out by the back door. That is what I meant to do to-night; I planned it all this afternoon. I know how to open our door without making a noise; I did it once when Dud—my brother, I mean, was ill. I went out to drive away some cows which were disturbing him;” and as Audrey said this, the thought of the past was too much for her, and she began to weep over the loss of her love for Dudley, which had been the strongest feeling of her life for so very many years. “Well, all that is over,” said she in bitter calm.

“No, dear child, no! I am certain there is some great mistake,” exclaimed Miss Newcomen. “I believe your brother to be honourable, and I know that Mr. George Copeland is. You will find that you have been terribly hasty, and have misjudged them. It is hard to think of what they must be suffering now! Could you not, at any rate, send a line to say you are well? You don’t know what dreadful things they may be imagining.”

“Let them imagine what they like! They deserve to suffer,” replied Audrey. “Yes, they do. Did they not cause all my pain, and watch how I bore it, and talk about my health in such miserable voices, while all the time they were quite willing to see me die?”

Miss Newcomen sighed, and said, “Ah! Audrey, what a change has come over you!”

“They might have kept me as I was for ever if they had cared to do so. I asked for nothing better than to love and obey them; but how can any one love mean cheats and liars?”

The truth was, that Audrey’s had never been a weak nature. All her strength had gone to

love of Dudley and desire to make him happy. She had been absolutely dependent on him, not because her nature was weak, but because it was her pride to show her love for him thus. She had always been abundantly able to depend on herself if she had cared to exert the faculty; now she meant to do so. Alas! there was no one else on whom she could depend.

She sat talking to Miss Newcomen for some time, and told her every detail she knew of the deception which had been practised on her. It was a black count, but in her heart Miss Newcomen hoped that George, at any rate, would be able to clear himself of all complicity; and she meant to do her best to try to keep his Audrey safe and well for him until that day came. Her rooms were well adapted for the service now demanded of them. The inner room, which had always been kept locked, was provided with a gas-fire, and this she had frequently had lighted to air the room. She made Audrey light it now, and put the mattresses and blankets down before it as a precaution against damp.

“To-morrow, my pet,” said she, “you may dust and arrange that room as you like, but for some nights to come you must sleep on my sofa. When your own bed is aired, you shall sleep in it. It is quite an adventure, isn’t it?”

But no smile could be wrung from Audrey yet.

“Tea and biscuits, and various other eatables, live in that chiffonier; for the rest, I can cut you some dinner off the joint when I cut my own. You must use one of the china plates in the next room. You will have to wash it yourself though, my child,” etc.

So talked Miss Newcomen, trying her very best to make Audrey more cheerful; but cheerfulness was far from her.

Audrey slept till eight o’clock next morning, and her hostess had time to review the events of the preceding day before she let her servant come in, and she was also able to indulge in a conviction that she was a very silly old woman. At first she thought so; after a while she came to the conclusion that if she had acted otherwise, Audrey would by

this time have done something which would have cast a gloom over all their lives for ever.

At this moment Audrey herself awoke, and, by Miss Newcomen's desire, at once carried off all her shawls and rugs, removed every trace of her presence, and locked herself in the other room, so that Sophy might come to light the fire.

"There's no news of the poor young lady, ma'am," said Sophy, as soon as she entered. "Leastways, none I have any pertikler belief in;" and then she proceeded to tell her mistress about Mr. Brian's departure the night before, with a closely veiled lady whom he had met somewhere on the Dorminster road. Miss Newcomen opened her eyes in astonishment, but she knew she had Audrey safe under lock and key. "Mr. Dudley and Mr. Copeland have gone after them as fast as the railway can carry them!"

Miss Newcomen wondered whether Audrey had heard this. In her hiding-place it was almost impossible to avoid hearing what was said in the sitting-room.

When Miss Newcomen was up, she and Audrey could readily talk with each other unsuspected by all, for Miss Newcomen always had her chair placed close by the door leading into the room in which Audrey was concealed, and it was easy to keep it open until a knock at the sitting-room door warned them that a servant was coming; or even if Audrey's door was seen a little open, it would excite no suspicion, for it had always been the old lady's habit, when alone, to unlock it occasionally, and sit gazing into a room which was for some reason so sacred to her.

Audrey had not heard Sophy's speech. Her thoughts had evidently been partly given to Brian, for one of the very first things which she said was—

“Miss Newcomen, don't you think that Mr. Templemore and I have been most cruelly used?”

Miss Newcomen took a moment to consider, and then, feeling sure that if Audrey was beginning to think kindly of her old lover, the sooner she was informed of his worthlessness the better, replied, “My dear,

you have been cruelly used, but you need waste no pity on Mr. Templemore — he deserves none.”

“What do you mean? He was told that I refused to see him. He is ill and miserable, and has had to go abroad to get better.”

“Yes, but who has gone with him? My dear, last night he started for the continent, but a young lady went with him.”

“Impossible!” cried Audrey.

“Quite possible and quite true. And your brother and husband have pursued them, thinking it was you.”

“Thinking it was I!” cried Audrey. “How dared they think so! They only pretended to think so; they know me better than that.”

She was silent a minute or two, and then said, “If that is true about Brian, then there is no one in the world who can be trusted.”

“You surely won’t fret about him, dear?”

“Of course I won’t; but I wish I had never been born. Miss Newcomen, you have lived longer in the world than I; is it your experience that every one in it is untrustworthy?”

“Shall I tell you the story of that room?”

replied her hostess. "When I was twenty, I was engaged to be married, and thought myself the happiest girl living, for I loved the man I had accepted as much as it was possible to love any one, and he me; and he was so good and kind, so handsome and clever! Dear child, before we had been engaged six months he had eloped with my younger sister, and I never had the slightest idea that they cared for each other. Well, they perhaps lived happily for a while, and I certainly lived unhappily, for then began the illness which has fixed me in this chair for so many years; and I hated them and myself, and everything else, and only wished to die. I lived with an aunt then. Poor old lady! how often I think of her with pity for all she must have suffered with me, for I would make no effort to be myself again, but simply believed that it was not worth while to trouble myself about health at all, considering what a world we were living in. After about four years, my poor sister came to us, ill, penniless, and broken-hearted, to beg us to take her in. All she had trusted

to had failed her. Her husband had soon ceased to love her, and had turned out ill in every way, chiefly because they were so unhappy together; and, finally, she had fled from him to die with us. We kept her alive two years, and then she died. There, in that room, she lived and died."

"But," cried Audrey, "your experience has been just the same as mine! Your life also has been ruined by treachery. Dear Miss Newcomen, why do you seem to care about keeping that room as it was? In your place, I should have done all that I could for the poor girl while she lived, but as soon as she died I should have hid away everything belonging to her, and have tried to forget."

"Oh no; I keep it as it was because in that room, while nursing her, I learned what has been the comfort of my life—resignation, and patience, and hope. You don't know what I was before she came! I often open that door now, and try to see her sweet suffering face, and catch more of the spirit which soothed her in her trials. How I wish you had seen her! I never can forget her, and

the sight of that room keeps me patient; for what are my sufferings to hers? All the good I know I learnt from her."

"But," said Audrey impatiently, "you must have learnt what I have learnt—that it is useless to trust in any one or anything?"

"My dear, I learnt nothing of the kind; she taught me to trust in God."

Audrey dared say no more. She thought to herself, "It is well to trust in God; you certainly cannot trust in any of His creatures! And it becomes hard to trust even in Him, for they are but what He made them."

She went about with this thought always in her mind, and thinking that if every one's experience was like her own, and all the traitors were suddenly made away with, the world would be a desert. In her own little fragment of it there was her uncle, and George, and Dudley, and Polly, and Brian; and probably all the rest of those about her, if their conduct was but inquired into. Miss Newcomen had only to name reconciliation to drive her to the highest pitch of excitement. She ceased to do so, being afraid lest Audrey should mistrust

her and steal away by night, without forewarning her. But she did insist on one thing—that Audrey should that very day, with her own hand, write a letter to her uncle, to tell him that she was safe and well. With much difficulty she prevailed upon her so far, but she could extract from her nothing beyond the following scanty note :—

“ I, Audrey Wentworth, write this to tell you that I am alive and well, that I do not mean to return to my family, and beg them not to seek me. Nothing would induce me to return to them if they found me, and nothing will ever induce me to alter this determination. You all know why I have left you. My aunt and Osmunda, so far as I know, did nothing against me—my love to them.”

This Audrey directed to her uncle, and Miss Newcomen sent it to a humble friend in London to post. It reached Mr. Copeland safely. It was sent on by him to George, as soon as George gave him an address to which he could write. That address was Marseilles, and it only arrived there after George and Dudley had left for Corsica; and

all the time they were there that letter, which, unsatisfactory as it was, would have been such a comfort to them, was posted up in the window of the landlord's little office in the hall at Marseilles, looking in vain for some one to recognize it and claim it.

CHAPTER XV.

“*Gotz.* Kein wort mehr davon! Ich bin ein Feind von Explicationen; man betrügt sich oder den andern, und meist beide.”—GOETHE.

“Yet, foolish sweet,
You love this man. I have watched you . . .
. . . when we talked of him :
I am not old for nothing ; I can tell
The weather signs of love—you love this man.”

E. B. BROWNING.

It was the beginning of February, and Audrey had now lived in Miss Newcomen's house for nearly two months, and so far, though conjecture was rife, not a single person in Dorchester had been visited with even a shadow of an idea of the possibility of such a refuge having been found by her. As for Miss Newcomen herself, she, poor lady, was much exercised in mind by what she had done, and in reality was now only waiting George Copeland's return to come to some decision

as to what she ought to do. She had the fullest faith in his honour; the most she could bring herself to believe against him was, that he might have passively connived at that scheme for enriching Dudley Wentworth on condition of his promoting his own marriage with Audrey, but she was sure that he wished for no assistance from Dudley but such as was legitimate. She had maintained this view to Audrey; and Audrey had always answered her by reminding her that Polly had confessed to giving up one letter at any rate to George, and that fact had staggered Miss Newcomen; but she was sure it would turn out that there was some mistake, and she now longed for his return more than for anything in the world. But he neither came nor wrote. Letter after letter had been sent to him by his own family to Ajaccio, for he had given them that address on leaving Marseilles, but none in reply came from him. Probably the snow-storm about which he had written was over, and he had made his way inland, but of the success of the mission on which he was bound they knew nothing.

So much Miss Newcomen learnt from Osmunda, who had once been to see her—only once, for all this excitement had made the good old lady ill, and after that one visit from Osmunda, she had refused to see her or any one else. She had other reasons besides her illness for keeping her friends away from her. It was impossible for her to listen to all they had to say about this marvellous disappearance of George Copeland's bride, without being drawn into uttering and assenting to more things which she knew to be untrue than she believed her soul could ever recover from. Besides that, Audrey was ill, and in no state to hear the thousand and one bits of gossip with which every one who came would have garnished the nine days' wonder. When some time had passed, the full desire to dwell on these details would be blunted; and meantime, Audrey would hear quite enough to make her very unhappy, from the little speeches of the servants of the house, and the five minutes' friendly conversation daily of the family doctor. He told Miss Newcomen that he was attending Mr. Copeland;

that “ Copeland, poor fellow, was quite broken down with over-work and anxiety ”—over-work because, now that his two head men were away, double work, to say the least of it, fell on him, and anxiety about his son. He was persuaded that the Corsican bandits had captured George—had perhaps asked a big ransom for him ; that George had written home to tell his father to send the money ; and that that letter, with all other letters, had miscarried, and, failing a remittance, George would be shot, or had been shot—or he had lost his life in a vendetta, or—— ”

“ But, my dear good sir,” exclaimed Miss Newcomen, who had more opportunities of reading than Mr. Copeland was able to command, “ Corsican brigands are not like Italian brigands. They don’t carry people off for the sake of getting a ransom for them ; they are only hiding from justice themselves. And as for a vendetta, it must be almost as difficult to be the hero of a vendetta as to be a gentleman ; it takes about three generations to set either the one or the other a-going ! ”

“Ah! it is all very well for you, dear madam. You happen to be acquainted with Corsican ways, and Copeland is not; and the young man is Copeland’s son, and he is not yours. It is astonishing what a difference that fact makes in your power of being reasonable. I am very sorry for Copeland. You know what the Corsican daggers have engraved on them?”

“Vendetta. Morte,” replied Miss Newcomen.

“Well, if there is not a vendetta there will be a morte soon, if news does not come from his son. He is distracted about him.”

“And what about young Wentworth?”

“Oh, I don’t think Mr. Wentworth’s fate particularly troubles him. No one knows the circumstances, of course, but that young man’s conduct seems to have been very shaky. I never thought anything of him myself, principally, I expect, because he thought so very much of himself. That is the way things go sometimes; we are not answerable for our fancies. Good morning. You are better to-day, decidedly better. Would it not amuse you to see some of your friends again?”

And Audrey heard this, and every word everybody else said. That was the worst of Miss Newcomen's habit of always receiving her visitors in the corner by Audrey's room door. She could not help hearing all they said. Well, as the doctor who had just left sometimes said of his medicine, "it was only to be hoped it would take and do her good."

Until the end of the second week in February, Miss Newcomen steadily kept to her resolution of seeing no visitors, but daily she prayed for George Copeland's return, and the longer he was in coming, the more anxious she grew about the rightfulness of her own conduct; and the more Audrey saw this state of mind prevailing in her hostess, the more she bound her to deeper depths of secrecy, or, if secrecy became impossible to her, to offer her the alternative of departure.

On the 12th February, little having occurred to mark the time but mental emotions, Miss Newcomen resolved to take a new line, throw open the door to all comers, and let Audrey run the gauntlet of criticism, and hear all that was said of her, and all that

was known of the various actors in the drama of her life.

Now, criticism in Dorminster was apt to be both free and searching, and Miss Newcomen, being the daughter of a deceased agent to the dean and chapter, had a wide circle of acquaintances, from the canons' wives down to the Copelands. She saw that the fragments of intelligence which Audrey from time to time picked up, from hearing the remarks of the doctor or the servants, affected her deeply; that she was uneasy about her uncle's illness, and grieved to think that she was the cause of his missing the comfort of his son's presence. She would not own that these things troubled her, but Miss Newcomen saw that they did, and only wished she had not spared her the social lash so long. That she might derive every possible benefit from the remarks she overheard, without any compunctious visitings because of being an eavesdropper in spite of herself, Miss Newcomen always used to say, when any one was likely to come, "Mind you listen to all we say, Audrey; it will help to amuse you, and I have no secrets."

Osmunda was the first visitor. "Dear Miss Newcomen," said she, "at last I see you. But you walk!"

The arrival of a stranger taught Miss Newcomen something which had come so gradually that she had in a great measure missed the observation of it. When Audrey first came to her, and was in such a pitiable state of grief, so many little things were wanting to her comfort, according to Miss Newcomen's hospitable ideas, that that poor old lady, in spite of all Audrey could say or do, in spite of the pain it gave her to move or even stand, often got up and crept about to find this or that; and by degrees the pain had become less, the strength of her limbs greater, until now she could walk a dozen steps or so with far less inconvenience than she could formerly accomplish one.

"Yes, I can walk, just as you see. But sit down here, dear, close by me in my pet corner, and tell me your news. The doctor told me yesterday that your father had heard from your brother. I am very anxious to know how he is."

“I came on purpose to tell you we had had a letter at last. We have been wretchedly anxious. He has been all this time snowed up at Corte, a little town in Corsica, and he has received hardly any of our letters until the other day; not even the one with that note from poor Audrey in it. You know the letter I mean, Miss Newcomen; I sent you a copy of it.”

“Yes, I saw it—the—copy, I mean,” said Miss Newcomen nervously; “but tell me what your brother says.”

“Ah, of course,” said Osmunda, “you want to know if he found her in Corsica.”

Poor Miss Newcomen blushed deeply. Truth was ingrained in her, but had to be so repressed just now.

“I will tell you at once he has not found Audrey. I never thought he would there. But poor George, Miss Newcomen—do you know, until the other day, when he got to Marseilles and found that letter of hers, he did not know whether she was alive or dead, and he must have been distracted all this time. He says that he had always more faith

in her than to believe that she would do such a thing as commit suicide; but he must have thought she had done so, when he heard nothing of her for so long. It was the natural thing to think, and I can see by his letter how miserable he has been."

"Speak a little louder," said Miss Newcomen, afraid lest Audrey might lose anything of what was said; "I am rather deaf."

Osmunda had never heard of this deafness, but then she never before knew that Miss Newcomen could walk a little.

"I hardly know where to begin, I have so much news to tell you. Poor Dudley Wentworth has been dangerously ill, and they have found out who it was who eloped with that wretch Mr. Templemore."

"Who was it?" asked Miss Newcomen; but Osmunda would tell her story in her own way.

"I will tell you in a minute; but is it not a blessing it was not Audrey? George is evidently very much vexed with himself for ever letting an idea so insulting to her come into his head."

“You don’t speak quite loud enough for me, my dear child.”

“George,” said Osmunda, beginning to scream, “is very much mortified at having been so base as to suspect Audrey. She was always his *beau-ideal* of womanhood.”

“I hope they will be happy together yet,” said Miss Newcomen.

“But where can she be? Miss Newcomen, have you never thought of any place where she might be? George thinks she is at the Cape; what do you say? Would you not say that it was much more likely we should find her in some place much nearer home?”

“Much more likely; but tell me more about the letter, dear.”

“Well, the girl Mr. Templemore ran away with was Polly. You remember poor Polly, who was servant for a while at No. 4?”

“He ran away with her! Why do you call her poor Polly, my dear? She must be a very bad girl.”

“She is dead. George was with her when she died. You don’t know what a good fellow George is, Miss Newcomen. Stay, I will read

you some of his letter ; it begins from Ajaccio, and he finishes it at Marseilles :—

“ ‘ MY DEAREST FATHER,

“ ‘ I got here from Corte a few hours ago. The first thing I did was to go to the post-office : such a homely, benighted little place it is. After three journeys to it, I unearthed two of your letters. I know they have more, but they deny it. I see in one of them you write as if you had had a letter from my dear Audrey ; for that my thankfulness is unspeakable. I always knew that she was far above the littleness of suicide ; but every one was against me on that point, and when one’s heart is in anything as deeply as mine in this, it is hard to stand alone in an opinion, for anxiety will creep in. I wrote to you when I got here, but I have no faith in their post-office, and dare say you never got my letter. I wrote twice from Corte, when I was there with Dudley Wentworth ; but as the ordinary route was blocked up with snow, and all letters had to take their chance of getting to Bastia, and round by Italy, where, I believe,

there was snow too, I had better briefly recapitulate all that I did after first landing in Corsica. We were snowed up in Ajaccio for a whole fortnight, knowing only that the two we were in pursuit of had gone on into the interior of the island. On the 15th of January we reached Corte, and stumbled at once on Templemore; but it was Polly who was with him, the servant who lately lived with the Wentworths, and the niece of the old housekeeper who has been so long at Minster-acres. She told me she was married to him. That, I am sorry to say, I afterwards found was untrue; but there was a great deal that was good in that unfortunate girl, and I shall always be sorry that she did not fall into better hands. When I saw that we were on this entirely wrong track, I need not tell you how humiliated and ashamed I was. Polly felt her mistress's fate very much. I knew at the time she had a guilty feeling of fear that she had helped to bring about all that had happened, for she as good as told me so, and referred me to Dudley, and said that if he did not tell me the truth, she would. I went

to Dudley. I insisted on his telling me everything which he had done to induce Audrey to accept me. Bitter as it is to confess it even to myself, I am compelled to see that she did not love me——

(“ She did ! ” cried Audrey to herself, when she heard this read aloud. “ She did love you, and far more than you ever knew ; but you did not deserve it. And how strange it is to find you writing in this hypocritical way to your father ! Why, conspirators conspire even against each other ! ”)

“ “ I am compelled to see that she did not love me, and the most shameful treachery and deception were used to her. So far as truth can be got out of a mean knave like Dudley Wentworth, I got it out of him——

(“ He is too hard on Dudley,” interrupted Osmunda, as she read that passage.)

“ “ I made him tell me what he called the truth ; his idea of truth fell very far short of poor Polly’s, though he would have scorned to compare himself with her. Afterwards she told me all that had been done. I cannot write it ; the details are low and sickening.

I will tell you all when I see you ; but after hearing it, I am only anxious to see poor Audrey and assure her that I had nothing to do with such miserable mean treachery, and give her her freedom. She shall never be made unhappy on my account again. I only wish I had never spoken of love to her. It was all unwittingly set a-going, I am afraid, by that promise of yours to leave money to Dudley if Audrey married me. You did not know what a grasping, vain, selfish fellow like Dudley might be tempted to do. Well, Dudley did not tell the whole truth, but he told me enough to make me hate and quarrel with him for ever. He was very angry too, and left me in a fury, and set off with the idea of getting back to Ajaccio somehow or other through the snow. The end was, that he was brought back to Corte next morning in a very alarming state, and for a fortnight or more he lay between life and death, and Christian decency obliged me to stay and nurse him, though I was pining to get back to England. I am afraid I detested the sight of Dudley. When he was partly out of danger, I found

poor Polly was lying downstairs ill with a fever, and alone, for Templemore had gone off on some visit before she was laid up. She was so desolate, so wretched in all ways, that I was glad I was there to be with her. In three days' time she died—penitent enough, poor thing. Templemore just came in time to see her, and came with the full determination to marry her. He is not such a bad fellow after all, but he has been selfish, and weak, and lamentably unable to make up his mind at the critical moment; but he has been punished almost beyond his deserts. Perhaps you will be like Dudley in one of his passions, and call me a “contemptible fellow” for ever speaking to him; but I not only spoke to him a great deal, but I was profoundly sorry for him, and stayed with him till the poor girl was buried (not long that in Corsica), and then brought him with me as far as Marseilles, where I am now. I dare say he will come back to England with me, for he wants to get to his father. He has good and generous impulses, and if he had been brought up to know what unselfishness was, would have

been a noble, affectionate fellow. He has told me where he is sure Audrey will be found—at Bellosguardo, with the Armitages, her dearest, kindest friends. I wonder none of us ever thought of that. I mean on my return to England, which will be not many hours after you receive this letter, to go out to the Cape at once—not to pursue her, poor child, but to tell her that I am innocent of all that was done to her, and to leave her free to stay where she is; only I want to hear from her own lips that she acquits and forgives me. Then I shall return to Dorminster, and end my days alone. I enclose a *vocero* the Corsicans chanted over poor Polly; of course my translation weakens and spoils it. Their verse is rugged and uncommonly quaint. Templemore's grief at her death was very pitiable. I told you that he had just made up his mind to marry her. He insisted on her name being engraved on her coffin as Mary Templemore, wife of Brian Templemore, Englishman. He did it, he said, because he could not bear the idea of one breath of scorn or blame resting on her memory in the place

where she died. She was buried with a locket he had given her tightly clasped in her hand. If I had not brought him away with me, I believe that he would have lingered on at Corte for her sake, and that would have been the ruin of him, for he would have fallen into the hands of the officers there. He will be better with his father.' ”

“Time he did take care of his father,” said Miss Newcomen, who had not so much pity for Brian as George had. “They say the poor old gentleman has had some sort of a fit or illness which has left him weak in intellect.”

“I don't care about the Templemores either,” said Osmunda, observing a tone of dislike in Miss Newcomen's voice. “The letter is full of Mr. Templemore and of Polly; he might have told us more about poor Dudley, and spoken more forgivingly of him.”

“Does he not tell you how he left him?”

“Yes; there is a bit of writing here in a corner—one might easily miss it—there, crossed at the top: ‘I left Dudley rather better, and certainly out of danger. Miss

Templemore, who came over from Ajaccio, promised to stay at Corte with him, and nurse him till he was entirely well. I trust I shall never see him again.' That seems very like wishing him dead," said Osmunda.

"Oh no, not the least. You must see yourself that those two could never work together again."

"Edward is going to be ordained on Whit Sunday," said Osmunda abruptly.

"You are very happy with him now, I think?" whispered Miss Newcomen, all at once forgetting her deafness.

"Yes, very happy indeed. I always did admire him very much, you know. Still, for all that, I don't like George to write in that way about Dudley;" and Osmunda sighed.

And Audrey almost heard the sigh and quite guessed the secret. It had never before occurred to her that Osmunda's love for Mr. Lauriston had just a little wavered and waned, because she could not help liking Dudley so much. Audrey had never dreamt of that before. It had been a very slight defection, but if Dudley had been similarly disposed to

her, there was no knowing how far Osmunda's love for Mr. Lauriston would have stood such a test.

Meantime, an earnest conversation was going on in the other room bearing, no doubt, directly on this subject, but Audrey would not let herself hear one word of it; she felt that it would not be fair. But the subject took a strange hold on her, and she began to wonder if Dudley had ever observed how much Osmunda liked him and cared for his good opinion; and by degrees one little circumstance after another came to her mind, and proved to her that Dudley not only knew it, but was fond of Osmunda himself. Words, looks, all proved that he had had his struggle—had fought his fight and won it.

“How wonderful!” thought Audrey. “And I never knew it. One has to be shut up in one room in this way, as I have been for weeks, to come to right ideas on any point. If I had been going about amongst other people as I used to do, I should never have thought of this. But have I come to right ideas on any subject, or do I know what

to think? Good and bad, and true and false, are so interwoven and mixed, it is impossible to judge of anything. Dudley, who was so false to me, shrank from making love to Osmunda, no doubt from a feeling of honour. He could have got Osmunda and her money, and have been happy into the bargain, and he did not. Why did he not do it? and why was he not equally honourable in his dealings with me? For my good, I suppose.”

But she dismissed that idea with contempt, and to escape from it relaxed her watch upon her ears, and listened with delight to Osmunda prattling of her happiness in being engaged to Edward, and the pleasure she felt in the idea of being a good clergyman's wife. There was no need for Edward to be a bishop now; she was quite content if he never rose to be anything higher in rank than a curate.

Miss Newcomen was sympathizing vigorously, and had evidently been in some slight degree in Osmunda's confidence.

Then, just as Osmunda was beginning to talk of her father, and how angry and miserable he was at the idea of George's going to

the Cape, there was a ring at the bell and a sound of ascending visitors.

“I will run away,” said Osmunda. “I must take the letter back to father. You have not read the *vocero*; shall I leave it?”

“Do—but tell me when you think your brother will come?”

“We think that he will be here to-night—his letter came yesterday.”

“Then do ask him to pay me a visit before he starts for the Cape. I want particularly to see him.”

When Audrey heard that, she determined to leave Miss Newcomen’s house that very night, unless that lady renewed and strengthened and swore to abide by every promise she had previously given, and even then she was not sure that she would dare to stay.

Osmunda went. Mrs. Heriot and Mrs. Wiltshire entered together. Mrs. Wiltshire was much interested in her aunt’s health, and both of them very glad the interdict was removed. More talk of Audrey; more embarrassing questions for Miss Newcomen to deal with, with what truth she might.

“What do you think has become of her?” asked Mrs. Wiltshire. “Come, aunt, you and I have never talked this over together; where is she? I have great faith in your opinion, for you sit here in your quiet corner and have time to come to right conclusions on all points. I hear the Copelands have begun to think she is at Bellosguardo with Agnes Armitage. Do you think so, or have you any ideas of your own on the question?”

“No, I have no particular ideas,” said Miss Newcomen evasively, feeling a ton of guilt settling down on her conscience, and wishing she had continued to keep all visitors out.

“But what about Bellosguardo?”

“Well, I don’t believe she is there; she had never much money.”

“She may have had enough to take her there.”

“She was a favourite of yours, Miss Newcomen,” said Mrs. Heriot, “so I won’t talk against her; indeed, she was quite a favourite of mine too. But she always was uncommonly close about her own affairs, and I don’t wonder at all at her running away from Mr. Copeland,

for she never did seem quite to know whom she wanted to marry and whom she wanted to leave alone. There was Gus once. She was very fond of Gus; and then after a while, whenever he went to her house to see her, there was no admittance. Ah, well! what is one man's evil is another man's good. When she would not see him, he left us the flowers in the conservatory; before that he used always to be carrying them off to her. And we had a weary time when he was verse-writing to please her. It did make him so cross!"

"The irritability of genius!" observed Mrs. Wiltshire with a smile, which turned into a modified sneer as she saw Mrs. Heriot was not looking her way. "Are you uneasy about Audrey, aunt? I mean do you think anything really bad has happened to her?"

"I can't help being very uneasy about her," replied Miss Newcomen, "but I don't think anything bad has happened to her."

"But what do you think?"

"My dear, I don't know what to think. You heard of that letter she wrote to her

uncle. That tells us what she wishes us to think."

"It seems that she has very nearly killed her unfortunate brother. He has been in the greatest danger. Who knows if he will recover at all? And she used to be so fond of him! At any rate, wherever she is, it is somewhere where she does not hear of the sad state he is in."

"She never could have been really fond of him," said Mrs. Heriot, "or she would not have acted as she did."

"Or of Mr. Copeland either! I suppose no one forced her to marry him?" said Mrs. Wiltshire.

"Such a thing for her to dress herself up in silks and satins, and to go and stand beside him at the altar, and have all that service read over her, if she meant to run away and leave him as soon as ever she got back from church. She must have been touched in her intellect to act as she did. That is the best excuse any one can make for her. Mind, I am saying what I think; it really does look like insanity. The bishop always did think there was a sus-

picion of that about her, her conversation was so exceedingly unconnected. The bishop's own sentences are so very well constructed, and his flow of ideas so sequent. However, we cannot all be alike. He always said, though, that if she married Gus, he would take some pains with her way of speaking, for our sake as well as hers. She had good parts, he said, but she was so uncultivated."

"I was really fond of the child," said Mrs. Wiltshire, "and I shall feel very uneasy until I hear she is safe and well."

"Poor thing!" murmured Miss Newcomen, pitying her on all grounds, but chiefly at this moment about "Gus," and thinking what a strain it must have been on her to sit still and hear that speech about him in quietness.

When the two ladies were gone she tapped at the door of communication, and softly called Audrey; but no Audrey came. Then she opened it, and went quietly to her, and found her lying with her face all wet with tears. Mrs. Heriot's speeches had not affected her at all, but she was deeply

troubled about Dudley's illness and George's proposed journey, her uncle's despair at losing him, and her own uncertainty as to how far she was acting as she ought to do.

"I am afraid I have behaved very wickedly. And yet they deserved—— Miss Newcomen, they did treat me shamefully. And now they send righteous letters to each other, and talk as if they could not even support the thought of a mean action. And yet we know what they did."

"My dear, George has quarrelled with Dudley. They send no righteous letters to each other."

"That is another proof of their having plotted together. People who do that kind of thing always do end by having a great quarrel. And then, why was he so devoted to Polly if they had not become friends together while deceiving me?"

"Glorious reasoning!" exclaimed Miss Newcomen. "No wonder men laugh at women's reasoning. You make one and the same cause produce entirely opposite effects to suit your own purpose. George and Dudley

plotted together, therefore they quarrelled; George and Polly plotted, therefore they became devoted friends. Audrey, your earnest desire is to shut your ears to the truth. You never can have cared for George! It was very wrong of you to marry him."

"I did care for him!" cried Audrey vehemently. "I felt the day I married him as if I were going to be happy all the rest of my life."

"Then why won't you believe the truth? You heard his letter, did you not? You must see that he is able to explain everything."

"He can never make it seem right for him to have persuaded Polly to give up to him a letter which I trusted to her to post."

"Ah! you take your stand on that?"

"I do, because the other things seem capable of explanation by throwing all blame on Dudley, which he has done. But Polly told me herself that he took that letter from her, and there is no getting over that."

"Well, we will have him asked about that," said Miss Newcomen. "There, read the *vocero* he sent; Osmunda left it for me."

“I read it? Oh no! I don’t like to hear of them dying, or being ill or miserable,” sobbed Audrey. “They have all behaved cruelly to me, but still it makes me so unhappy to be told about them.”

“I will read it to you,” said the pitiless Miss Newcomen, determined that nothing which came in her way likely to soften Audrey should miss its effect for want of being used:—

“‘The white rose came from the North, where storms are loud and strong. She came when the ground was of her own colour. She did not know our mountains.

“‘And God said, she has travelled very far; she sought sunshine, and found frost and snow. Let her come to Me; with Me the sun shines always; with Me are none deceived.

“‘Far, far up Monte Doro grow bright flowers, sweeter than any found below; and God said, roses should grow in high places too; white rose, come to Me.

“‘Heaven must be very beautiful with flowers such as these, but she ought to have stayed with us—to have stayed till the

chestnuts bloomed. My rose, my jasmine, why didst thou go so quickly?

“ ‘Here she could not speak to us, or know what we wished to say to her. God, who has taken her from us, will at least tell her that we loved her.’ ”

CHAPTER XVI.

“Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well,
When our deep plots do pall.”

HAMLET.

“He stepped forth, and with all surprise
Made nought by love, his mortal eyes,
His weary eyes, beheld indeed
His heart’s desire, his life, his need,
Still on the earth, still there for him.”

MORRIS.

NEXT morning Audrey looked very pale and unhappy, and as if she had not slept for a week. Miss Newcomen was in the same plight. Each was full of sympathy for the other, but neither could find anything comforting to say. They knew George Copeland had come home—the doctor had told them that—and that he was going off to Southampton on Thursday morning, on his way to the Cape.

This was Sunday. Miss Newcomen had again ordered her servant to deny her to

all visitors, with the exception of any of the Copelands who might come, for she herself could not be fretted with the sight of indifferent persons now that every thought of her heart was so entirely given to one subject; but none of the Copelands came, and Audrey grew more and more concerned, more and more nervously anxious, though she tried to maintain her usual hard demeanour.

“Shall we see any of them to-day, do you think?” said she on Tuesday, in a voice of assumed indifference.

“I don’t know,” replied Miss Newcomen, trying to appear equally indifferent. “Very likely not, I should think; you see, George goes away again the day after to-morrow.”

“But, dear Miss Newcomen, he must not go! We must prevent it. I could not have his father’s death on my conscience. He might die while George was away!”

“Then you don’t care about George’s going?” said Miss Newcomen.

“Neither you nor George ever knew how much I did care for him. And so I did for Dudley, and see what has come of it with

both ! Stay, there is a ring at the bell. It may be George himself. I must go—but, oh, do be faithful to me, and do try to stop him going ! ”

It was Osmunda.

“ You don’t look like yourself, my dear child, this morning. What is it ? ” said Miss Newcomen.

“ I dare say not. Our house is so miserable, and everything is so wretched. George *will* go away to the Cape on Thursday ; and the very idea of his leaving us again, when he has just come home, makes father furious. He thinks George might make writing do. ”

“ So do I. Why does he not ? ”

“ He says that it would be perfectly useless to write, for if Audrey were there she could, if she wished, easily persuade Mrs. Armitage to deny it to screen her, and in that way we should never really know the truth. That is what he says ; but, Miss Newcomen, don’t you think it would be very wicked of Mrs. Armitage to do that ? She would surely tell us if Audrey were there ; she must know how miserable we all are. ”

“People do wicked things sometimes, Osmunda, without either wishing or intending them. Stay, that is not quite what I mean—but do, pray, make George stay at home.”

“Impossible! He says writing would be of no use. She may have things on her mind against him which he could easily explain away, if he only knew what they were. Unless he goes, he is sure he never will know, for she won’t say anything about them in a letter, and so they never would be put right.”

“I dare say that is quite true,” admitted Miss Newcomen very reluctantly.

“Possibly; but really if George goes I am afraid father will be ill, if only from vexation.”

“Is your father not anxious too?”

“Very, but only to know she is safe; he does not want to see her amongst us again. He says he never can forgive her for all the suffering she has brought on him, and that George cares far more about her than she deserves; and that makes George angry, and the more he says the more furious father becomes, and then mother cries. We are not such a happy household as we used to

be. It really was hardly fair of Audrey to bring so much trouble on us ! ”

“ You seem to forget, Osmunda, how cruelly she had been used. I don’t defend her, but think how she had been deceived ! ”

“ That was no reason for making every one of us wretched. We did not deceive her—it was her own brother who did that. If father died while George was away, and after so much that is unpleasant has passed between them, George would have something to reproach himself with all the days of his life.”

“ Indeed, my dear, I wish Audrey would relent. You may hear from her again.”

“ Oh no ! George has had advertisements put in all the papers entreating her to write. Her name does not appear, of course ; but she cannot fail to know they are meant for her. And yet, you see, she takes no notice.”

“ Ask your brother to be sure to come to see me before he goes. I want to see him particularly ; I must see him. Promise me, Osmunda, to send him to me.”

“ He is certain to come. He said he would.”

When Osmunda left, Miss Newcomen feebly made her way into the next room. It was easy to see that Audrey was very much shocked and distressed. "But," said she, with that strong fear of trusting to her own good impulses which had now become habitual to her, "we must not make ourselves too easily unhappy. They are all good actors; they can readily deceive a girl like Osmunda—they will find her a little more difficult to deceive than they found me, but they can do it."

"Audrey, I don't like you when you talk in that way—it is unnatural and wicked. Now, I insist on one thing. You may please yourself as to the great point of revealing your hiding-place or not, but you shall do something to prevent George from going to the Cape. Think yourself how you would feel if his father did die while he was away, and died angry with him?"

Audrey hung her head, looking very pretty, but half inclined to be rebellious.

Miss Newcomen continued in a most decided voice—"You must write at once to say that you have been informed of his

intention of going to seek you at the Armistages', and that you wish him to know that you are not there, but in England, and safe and well."

"But as desirous to keep away from him and from all of them as ever," added Audrey firmly.

"Is that really true?" asked Miss Newcomen. "Can you not believe in your husband's honour?"

"My husband!" said Audrey, with a sudden blush. "Why do you use that word? If he were honourable, I would not disown him—but he intercepted my letter to Brian."

"I told you I meant to ask him about that. I have said nothing about it to the others, lest you should think he had prepared a defence; but when he comes to see me, I will ask him pointblank, and I beg you to listen to his answer. But, Audrey, dear child, if you would but be sensible and put an end to all this unhappiness, for your own sake as well as theirs. Let George come in and find you sitting quietly with me, doing a bit of fancy-work!"

“Never!” cried Audrey indignantly. “I see that you are laughing at me.”

“I am giving you good honest advice, but you won’t take it—so sit down and write your letter. There is not time to send it to London to post, so you must address it to me this time, and I will show it to the Copelands and pretend I have lost the envelope.”

“Dear Miss Newcomen,” wrote Audrey, “I am told my Cousin George is thinking of going to the Cape in search of me. Will you tell him that his search will be useless. I am in England, and safe and well, and as firmly resolved never to see any of them again as when I left. My dear love to you, my kindest friend.”

“There! I will put Audrey Wentworth at the bottom of the note, and London at the top, and then it will do.”

“The name will then be as true as the address,” said Miss Newcomen, who was vexed with Audrey’s hard-heartedness.

Next morning came Mr. Copeland with all speed, summoned by a note from Miss Newcomen to tell him that she had had a letter

from Audrey, which she wished to show him. He took it; he read it; he sniffed indignantly, and frowned at its contents.

“London!” said he. “A nice place for a girl of nineteen to be in alone! Good heavens, Miss Newcomen, how she writes! Just as if she were set up on a pinnacle above us all, and had only to say the word and we should be too glad to take her back without one apology or inquiry. That always was the way of those two young people. I opened my heart to the boy for my wife’s sake, and without making any favour of it, or asking for one penny of premium, I took him into my business, and almost at once put him in the way of making a handsome fortune, and my son stood by and let me do it without gainsaying me. And, madam, I can truly say this: I never had a word of thanks that amounted to anything from either Dudley or his sister. He came and worked very fairly, but he always let us see he despised and hated the whole concern; and as for the girl, I don’t believe that any power on earth would ever

have made her comprehend that Dudley was not doing us all a great favour by accepting what I offered him."

"Dear Mr. Copeland, don't let it vex you so. You could not expect a child like Audrey to be aware of the extent of the obligation."

"She need not have played us this trick. My dear madam, you were intimate with her; have you no idea why she left?"

"From what I gather from things I hear, I should imagine that one reason was because she thought that Mr. George and you and her brother had arranged the marriage amongst you — you must excuse me for saying such things; I am only giving you her fancies — and, to speak commercially, that you had paid Dudley Wentworth for his good-will by a liberal provision at your death."

"Confound Dudley Wentworth and his good-will! Pray forgive me, that was not the way at all. I never meant to buy his good-will. I only told him what I had made up my mind to do in case the marriage took place, because he was fretting himself into

the grave with his contemptible disappointed vanity, and I had a liking for him, a great liking; but George never knew one word about that business. So help me God! he did not, and if I had but known what a scoundrel Dudley was, he should never have heard of it either. It is hard on me, Miss Newcomen; I loved both those children with all my heart, and I thought them worthy of all the kindness I could show them—and see how they have turned out. Dudley, the meanest of mean cheats, and God only knows to what depths the poor girl may have fallen. You may think what I suffer about those two; and, besides that, I am called upon to stand by and see my dear son break his heart. He cannot be persuaded out of his love for Audrey. Even this disgrace which she has brought on us has not shaken him.”

“I don’t see the disgrace!” cried Miss Newcomen warmly; “the publicity is very distressing, but where is the disgrace?”

“If you don’t see it, I do. Where is she? What is she doing? No one hides who is not doing something wrong. And you, Miss New-

comen, don't hear half that is said. The Lauristons—the old people I mean—have been very nasty about it; and, indeed, at one time I thought there was a good chance of Osmunda's marriage being broken off in consequence. Osmunda would not let any of them say a word against Audrey, and there was no stopping the Lauristons' tongues, so we had nothing but quarrels going on amongst us."

"Poor Audrey! She is answerable for a great deal."

"I thought she was going to be answerable for my death last week, but I am better now; I wish it may last."

"George won't go away now that we have heard from her," said Miss Newcomen, "so you will have less to try you, I hope."

"I don't know, I'm sure," said Mr. Copeland, who had lately grown quite unreasonable; "he tries me very much when he is at home. He and I can't get on a bit now. We shall never agree about her—no, never!"

George now came in, and Miss Newcomen gave him the letter to read. This was the

first intimation he had of its arrival, for he had been out when Miss Newcomen's note was given to his father. His eyes dwelt in silent pleasure on Audrey's well-known handwriting.

"Well, George," said Mr. Copeland impatiently, "there is nothing about that which need take up much of your time. You see what she says; it is little enough and poor enough, and I do think she might have kept her nasty speeches to herself, and have told us instead how she was living and what she was doing."

"And where she was," said George.

"*That* does not matter so much," replied Mr. Copeland, who was angry with George for looking so happy at the sight of the letter. "I don't suppose we any of us want to see much more of her."

"Father!" said George reproachfully.

"Son!" said Mr. Copeland angrily. "I suppose the next thing would be that you would take her back at a moment's notice without a word of explanation."

"Ah!" said George, "if I could only see her, I have little fear of the explanation being

wanting. I almost think I can explain everything myself."

Mr. Copeland uttered an angry exclamation, and began an angry speech, but he checked himself and said, "Madam, I wish you good morning. I must go, or I shall be quarrelling with George before you. He and I used to get on, but we never think alike now. This is the way now from morning till night. How I do wish those two Wentworths had never come within a hundred miles of us!"

"Don't go, father!"

"Yes, I will—I must. Good morning, Miss Newcomen, good morning."

"Now, George Copeland," said Miss Newcomen, "sit down by the fire, and tell me the whole story of what you have found out about this sad affair, just as you found it out. Osmunda has told me everything, I dare say, and she has shown me your letters, but I want you kindly to tell me everything over again, beginning at the very beginning, and telling me all in the order in which you made your discoveries. I have a very particular reason for asking this, which I will tell you. It is

that I fancy there is one thing, and an important thing too, of which you are still ignorant, but I shall soon see—only be sure to speak rather loud; I am afraid that I am beginning to grow deaf.”

George sat down, and in a quiet, straightforward way told everything which the reader knows already; and as he spoke, Miss Newcomen's heart warmed to him more and more, and she felt that the hidden listener could not but see that there was not a shadow of guilt or double-dealing about him, or any feeling which did not bear witness to the highest and strongest sense of honour, and the truest affection for herself. But that incident about Polly and the letter which George was supposed to have intercepted by her help played no part in his narrative, and that was the one fact on which Audrey rested as proof positive of his complicity in the plot. He had said enough already, in Miss Newcomen's opinion, to clear himself of all such complicity, but the cup of explanation should be filled to the brim; so she turned to him, and said—

“There is one thing, Mr. George, which you

have not yet made clear, and I fancy it is just the one thing which made Audrey turn most against you. She was told that you had caused one of her letters to be intercepted."

"I do such a thing! I take her letters! The poor dear child must have been strangely deceived somehow."

"She was told so. You know, of course—for you have just told me—that on her wedding day she questioned that housemaid Polly, and Polly confessed to her that Dudley Wentworth had made her steal all the letters which came from the Templemores, and ordered her to deny them admittance to the house when they called."

"Yes, I know, but I had nothing to do with that; it was Dudley who did that. No one can for a moment maintain that I was an accomplice of his!"

"I hardly know what may have been maintained, but this I do know" (this in a very loud voice, and stated as offensively as possible, to leave nothing to desire on the part of the unseen listener), "that Audrey was told by Polly that you yourself had taken possession

of one letter of hers to Mr. Brian Templemore—when I say taken possession of, I mean that you employed Polly to steal it, or, when you found out that she had stolen it, you made her give it up to you; and it was that important letter—the letter which contained what the child called her indenture. Now, dear Mr. Copeland, explain that;” and as she spoke, Miss Newcomen’s anxiety was expressed by a nervous tremor in every limb.

“Ah!” said George, “I understand now; but it is a very long story, and Polly never said anything about it to me in Corsica. I suppose she never knew how much had been made of those words of hers about the letter. I will tell you how that was. Audrey never knew what you and every one else were quite aware of, that on the evening of the very day she gave that letter to Polly to post, the poor girl tried to drown herself. I saved her life. I had her taken to the refuge. That letter of Audrey’s was in her pocket. The matron found it with the envelope so spoiled by the water, that if I had not recognized a bit of Templemore’s name, and been aware that

Audrey had just written to him to send the indenture back according to promise, no one could have known for whom it was intended. I saw that, for some reason then unexplained, Polly had not posted it when she ought, so I was afraid to leave it in her hands—besides, the letter was now open. I was unwilling to worry Audrey with the sight of it again, and yet I did not like to have much to do with it myself, so I made Polly direct it, and took it to the post at once, and Templemore will tell you that he got it.”

“How strangely simple all these things, which puzzle us so much and affect us so much, turn out to be when explained.”

“Yes; but, with all its simplicity, this trifling act of getting Polly to direct the letter brought about a very singular bit of retributive justice. I, strange to say, know about it from Templemore himself, and what he did not happen to tell me Polly did, so I can make all clear to you. But, in the first place, I must tell you that the reason poor Polly was such a willing agent to Dudley was that Templemore had once wanted to

marry her, and she was still wildly in love with him, and when she found that he loved Audrey, she tried to drown herself."

Then George told Miss Newcomen about the changing of the indentures, which had led Templemore to disregard so completely the arrival of the half which Audrey had sent him, especially when it was addressed by Polly.

"Served him right," said Miss Newcomen. "If he had been true to Audrey, nothing of all this could have happened to him, and there would have been no jealous Polly ready to obey any of Dudley's mean orders. Mr. Templemore brought all that he had to bear on himself."

"Ah! don't we all do that? And does that make things better to bear?"

"No; you suffer unjustly. You, Mr. Cope-land, are what I have always thought you—good and true and honourable. This was the one accusation brought against you in this matter, and see how splendidly well you have come out of it. I always knew you would, but it has taken a weight off my mind all the same."

“And now, my dear Miss Newcomen,” said George, “excuse my asking you one question. It has been puzzling me all this time to understand how you know that Audrey suspected me of taking that letter, or that Polly told her about it. I never knew she did, so you cannot have heard it from my sister, and there is nothing of that kind in the letter you have just received. Have you had any other letter from Audrey?”

Miss Newcomen, poor old lady, had during this speech gradually turned crimson. She had quite forgotten that she was not expected to know this. She stammered and became confused and terrified: her zeal had most painfully outrun her discretion. George wondered and waited for the words of explanation which still she could not utter.

“I suppose I must own,” said she at last, “that I have had some communication with her of which I have not informed you; I don’t deny that. Give me a little time to think how much I am at liberty to tell you.”

“Are you able to send a message to her?” cried George vehemently, “for if so, do tell her that I loved and love her with all my heart; that I am incapable of deceiving her, and never wronged her even in thought; that all the time when I loved her so, I would, if she had only let me know that she wished it, have gone and brought Templemore to her; that my feelings never should have stood in the way of her happiness.”

Miss Newcomen was painfully excited. She had covered her face with her hands, and tears were trickling down behind them.

“I never knew till all these things came out,” continued George, “that she cared so little for me. I now see that if that letter I posted had been properly understood by Templemore, I should have had to give her up and stand by and see them happy together.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Miss Newcomen warmly. “I don’t the least believe it. Her faith in him was completely worn out. I am certain she loved you then, and loves you still.”

“If that were but true! If I could but hear her say so, the past would be nothing, and I should be the happiest fellow in the world.”

There was a slight sound behind him as of the opening of a door, a soft footstep, a rustle of a dress; but George's whole attention was occupied by a strange expression which had come into Miss Newcomen's face. She was looking fixedly at what, so far as George had troubled himself to think about it, was a blank wall behind him, but her eyes were dilated with something between anxiety and fear. Was she going to be seriously ill? He had done very wrong to let a poor invalid give so much time and thought to him and his sorrows. But even while this idea was forming in his mind, he felt a very gentle and timid touch on his shoulder, and heard a voice, the dearest voice in all the world to him, saying—

“George, what Miss Newcomen has just told you is quite true.”

And there was his own Audrey standing by

him. She had come so noiselessly, her appearance was so utterly unexpected, that for a moment he thought she was a ghost. But it was a flesh and blood Audrey; and there she stood by him trembling, for the boldness which had brought her forth from her hiding-place was fast deserting her, and now she felt a sudden rush of shame and fear at the sight of him whom she had deserted so cruelly and insulted by such shameful doubts. George sprang to his feet in amazement. She clasped her hands together and stood drooping before him.

“Audrey,” cried he, “Miss Newcomen? Oh, Audrey!” And he took her hands and drew her to him, trying with all his power to look into her eyes and read if she did love him or not; but she never raised them from the ground.

“Yes, my dear Mr. George, she is there!” cried Miss Newcomen. “I have kept her safely for you. Now, Audrey, I know you do love and trust him, be a good child and tell him so.”

"Can you ever forgive me, George?" she whispered.

"Forgive you, my own dear Audrey! I should think so. Can you ever trust me?"

"Trust you?" echoed Audrey. "I can trust you through everything!"

"And perhaps you will love me too some day?"

"George!" said Audrey, looking up; and he saw in her eyes that she loved him then.

Audrey and George lived happily together, and each year in its flight added to their love for each other. After some twelve of these had passed, they took up their abode at Minsteracres, leading a higher and nobler life than any Audrey had ever dreamed of in those younger days, when her future and how it was to be spent filled all her thoughts. There they often saw Brian Templemore walking patiently up and down the country lanes with

his poor old father. The squire's mind had become much weakened by repeated attacks of illness, but that very weakness prolonged his life. Now he had no sudden and dangerous illnesses, but enjoyed a placid and thoroughly happy existence in the constant companionship of his son.

Mrs. Templemore was dead, but he was now unconscious of her loss. Lottie, under Brian's supervision, had grown into a very charming girl, and was married. But the squire never missed her—he had his son, and the mere sound of his name or the sight of his face always made his eyes brighten and his heart glad. The knowledge of what he was to his father was the one comfort of Brian Templemore's life. The squire often urged him to marry, and sometimes, when he saw Audrey's children playing about near the house, would say pathetically—

“ Ah ! Brian, if we only had some nice children of our own to play about the gardens here ! Is there no pretty girl anywhere you could take a fancy to ? ”

The squire had forgotten all the past, but in Brian's mind, whenever marriage was named, rose up two faces distinct and clear, faces which had been saddened by his misdoing—both loved, lost, and never to be forgotten. He was not idle—he worked, read, and thought, and was looked on in the county as the very model of what a landowner should be; and he found some degree of happiness in striving to do his best in all things.

Osmunda married Mr. Lauriston. He is not a bishop yet, but owing to some spirited articles in defence of much attacked saints and prophets, many say he is, of all the deans, the one most likely to be raised to the bench.

Dudley Wentworth stayed at Corte until he entirely recovered; then he moved to Nice, and there he married his kind nurse, Miss Templemore. She was eighteen years older than he was, but she loved him, and was kind to him at a time when no one else was, and she makes him a very good wife. He has the use of her large income, but she insists on holding the reins of power. She never was

what is called sentimental. He soon found that out, and ceased to look for it in her ; for once, after a continued course on his part of disadvantageous comparisons between the beautiful places which they visited together and the park at Minsteracres, she turned sharply round on him and said—

“ Dudley Wentworth, is it not possible for you to enjoy any place we go to because the park at Minsteracres is beautiful ? ”

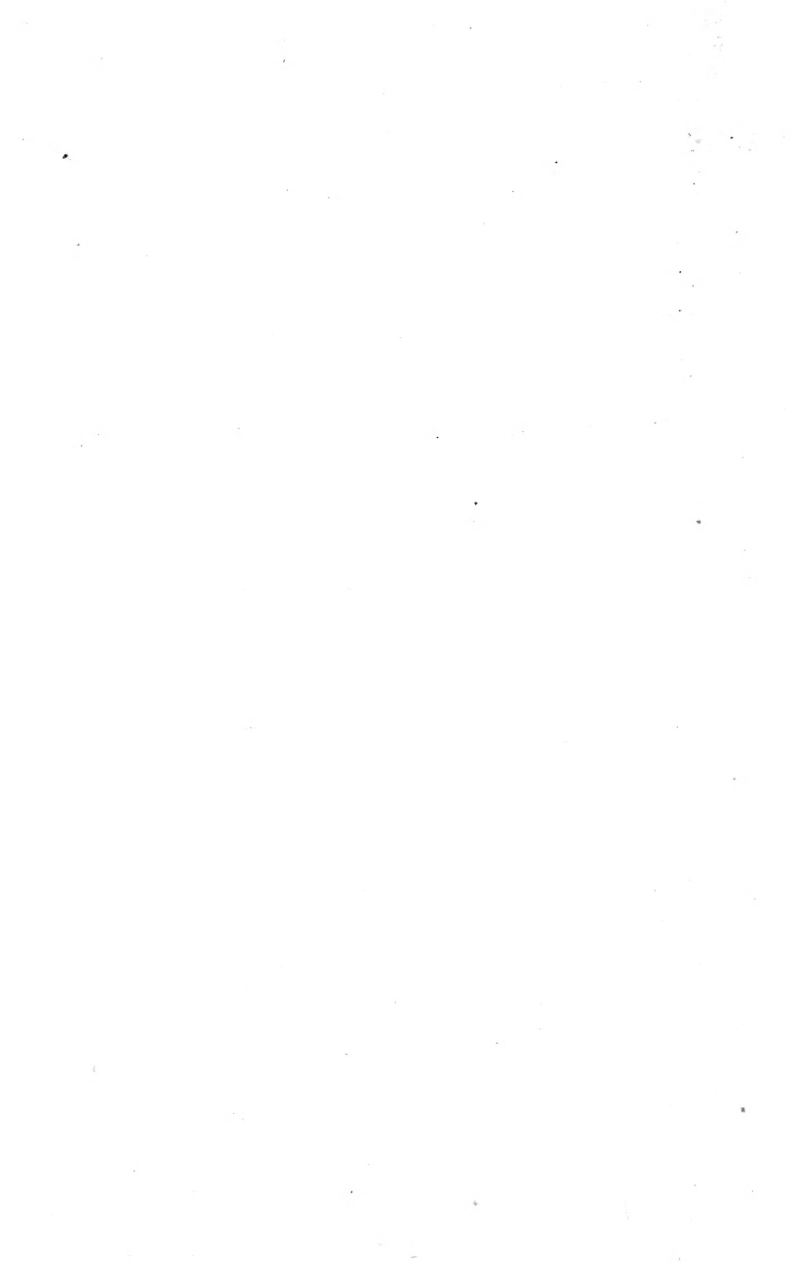
So after this he held his peace about Minsteracres. He was in many respects a soured man all the days of his life, but he had always money enough to live like a gentleman. He has never gone back to England. Miss Templemore had for years been obliged to winter abroad ; as Mrs. Dudley Wentworth, she spends the summer out of England also. Her reason for this probably is that she does not wish to see her husband exposed to the pain of meeting friends and relations who do not set a sufficiently high value on his affection.

Audrey quite recovered her health. Some-

times she and her husband used to smile over the strange way in which the doctor's orders that she should spend the whole winter in one room had been carried out, and how well the prescription had answered; but she always ended by saying—

“Successful or not, I don't advise any one to try to do the same thing.”

THE END.



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